

choice

AUGUST 2009 • WWW.CHOICE.COM.AU



Organic meat

Even some butchers can't tell if their meat truly is organic. How to find the real deal.



Solar power

As energy prices head skywards, can solar power save consumers?

On test

Media players
Washing machines
Chest freezers
Benchtop mixers
Landline phones
Zoom lenses
Hair dryers

MIXING MEDICINES

Finding the
safe blend

PLUS

The Grocery CHOICE
fallout – your say

Hospital cover –
CHOICE's 28 Best Buys

Simmer sauces:
the verdict

Coming clean on
'natural' toothpastes

Latest hair dryer
technology tested



What is the true cost of legal advice? Your rights explained

Waiting for your call



I have cancelled most of my meetings in August so I can be on the phone, talking to you about important consumer issues, as well as the things about CHOICE you would like to see changed. I talk to members every day because my job is to make sure we

deliver the very best we can, so you can be savvy and active consumers. Over the past few weeks, my conversations with members have increased, and devoting four weeks to hearing from you is just going one step further. My phone number is **1800 266 786**, so please call me and let's start a conversation about the issues that matter most to you.

One of the things you may feel strongly about is the federal government's decision to pull Grocery CHOICE just five days before its launch. I am very proud of the team at CHOICE, who worked night and day to make this a great success. Had the government allowed us to launch, it really would have helped transform the groceries sector, giving consumers the price comparison information you need to make your money go further.

Over the past few weeks thousands of people have supported CHOICE in response to the federal government's decision to side with supermarkets; almost 7000 people voted in our online poll, with 98% saying they think the government is not doing enough to drive competition in this sector. The government's decision

galvanised people into taking action and has made me more resolute than ever that we should take on the giant supermarkets in Australia to bring about greater price transparency and competition. This is the fight of our lives and we need your support to make it successful.

There are three ways in which you can really help us make a difference.

1. Call me with your thoughts and ideas on how we can work together to really make a difference in the groceries sector.
2. Spread the word and help us recruit more members – the greater our numbers, the more powerful our collective voice.
3. When we call for action, please join us, so we can all be a part of making positive change happen.

CHOICE is a social enterprise, run for and by you, our members. Your membership provides the funds for us to take on the big fights. Every day we look to see how we can give you more value for your money and this month's issue is no exception. We have a new-look magazine with all your trusted features and reports; our first money-saving guide, *Smart Savings*, full of hints and tips on how to make the most of your money during challenging economic times (call 1300 262 330 for your free booklet); and a link-up with the ABC that gives you a 10% discount on a digital radio – see page 66 for more details.

I welcome your feedback on all these initiatives, so pick up your phone and tell me what you think. I'm waiting for your call.

Nick Stace
Chief Executive

The minister's decision to pull Grocery CHOICE has galvanised people into taking action.

CHOICE. Make the right one.

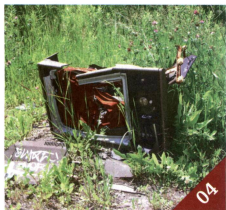
CHOICE gives you the power to choose the very best goods and services, and avoid the worst. We pay full price for the products we test, so we remain 100% independent. We don't take advertising and we don't accept freebies from industry.

We're not a government body and our consumer publishing and advocacy is funded by subscriptions to our magazines, CHOICE Online and from other services we supply for the benefit of consumers.

CHOICE product ratings are based on lab tests, expert assessments and consumer surveys. CHOICE staff also research a wide range of consumer services. They reveal the truth behind the facts and figures, and investigate the quality and the claims.

SUBSCRIBE TO CHOICE CHOICE Plus \$32 per quarter for magazine and full online access; **CHOICE personal subscription** One year \$82, two years \$153; **Company/institution** One year \$132, two years \$253. **ONLINE membership** \$21.95 per quarter.

CHOICE COMPUTER Personal subscription One year \$42, two years \$92 for CHOICE subscribers (usually \$48/\$80); **Company/institution** One year \$78, two years \$146. **SUBSCRIPTION AND RENEWAL** Call 1800 069 552. **SUBSCRIBERS' HELPLINE** Call 02 9577 3399 or email us at ausconsumer@choice.com.au. **CHOICEextra.com.au** Free website for CHOICE magazine subscribers with an index of articles from Jan/Feb 2002, plus links to PDFs.



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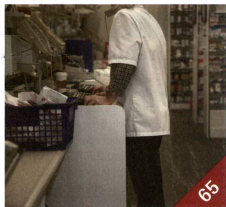
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big difference to the look and
feel of your hair?

+ DEBIT CARDS

Winners and losers in the card game

MasterCard and Visa debit cards are gaining in popularity, but at what price?

The battle for market share between the two rival debit card systems is intensifying, but consumers risk paying the price in hidden costs. While EFTPOS retains the lion's share of the debit card market, the international schemes MasterCard and Visa (called scheme debit cards), are gaining ground. They increased their share of debit card purchases from 21% to 25% in just over a year. Scheme transactions are generally "free", but other costs lie beneath the surface.

Retailers pay a fee to their bank for each MasterCard and Visa debit transaction they process. For the banks issuing those cards to customers, the transaction costs are lower than if their customers use EFTPOS. This may partly explain why more financial institutions are

offering scheme debit cards, either as stand-alone or "combo" cards that can connect to both the EFTPOS and scheme systems. Westpac has been migrating customers from EFTPOS to Debit MasterCard for some time. And more than 100 financial institutions offer Visa Debit cards.

The fees retailers' banks pay to process MasterCard and Visa debit transactions are regulated by the Reserve Bank (RBA). While these "interchange fees" don't appear as separate items on your statement, it doesn't mean the transactions are free – retailers will have to find some way to recoup these costs. One option is to surcharge customers; another is for retailers to absorb the interchange costs.

Between March 2008 and May 2009, the value of transactions made

with MasterCard and Visa debit cards increased 37%, according to RBA statistics. This compared with a 10% growth in EFTPOS transactions over the same period.

According to Visa, part of the reason for the increased uptake of scheme debit cards is they can be used for internet and overseas transactions. They can also offer "chargeback" protection (see Money Matters, page 7). However, Russell Zimmerman, Chair of Australian Merchants Payments Forum, which represents small and large retailers, says the main driver of scheme debit transactions is banks urging their customers to use that system.

EFTPOS is a cost-effective system with a relatively low incidence of fraud, but urgently needs updating in order to compete with debit cards that are accepted online and overseas. The risks and costs of increased fraud from those transactions, however, would need to be considered. It is likely MasterCard and Visa debit cards will continue to take market share from EFTPOS, driving up retailers' costs to process transactions and potentially putting upward pressure on prices. **ALAN DOOLEY**

EFTPOS is a relatively safe, cost-effective system, but urgently needs to be updated to compete with scheme debit cards.

+ ELECTRONIC PROGRAM GUIDES

Digital TV guidelines

Industry watchdog to monitor broadcasters against new EPG principles.

The Australian Communications and Media Authority (ACMA) has released guidelines for free-to-air digital television broadcasters' electronic program guides (EPG). The guidelines recommend that EPG data must be freely available, there must be a minimum of seven days' scheduling information and parental guidance ratings should be shown with program details.

ACMA believes EPGs are an important part of the new digital television landscape and will

encourage the take-up of digital services as people become aware of the benefits of accessible program information. The regulator will monitor broadcasters against the newly created EPG guidelines and may use this information to develop industry codes or standards for digital television services.

The ACMA announcement comes after the recent win for independent EPG IceTV against the Nine Network in the High Court, which found IceTV did not infringe copyright in Nine's television schedule. **ROSALYN PAGE**

CAN YOU HELP?

Commission refunds

Several companies offer to refund the commissions that super funds, investment funds, insurance companies and home loan providers pay to financial advisers and brokers. If you've switched to a commission refunder we'd love to hear about your experience – email money@choice.com.au, fax 02 9577 3377 or write to CHOICE, 57 Carrington Rd, Marrickville 2204, and mark your letter "Commission Refunds".

Cal		6" Sub
560	Meatball Marinara	3.69
450	Italian B.M.T.	4.29
480	Spicy Italian	4.29
400	Prime Rib Steak	4.29
380	Subway Melt	4.49
580	Chicken & Bacon Ranch	4.79
LOCAL FAVORITES		
Cal		6" Sub
410	Cold Cut Combo	3.69
530	Tuna	3.99
450	Seafood Sensation	4.29

➤ HEALTH

Kilojoules on the menu

Fast food chains in the UK and US give patrons information to make healthier choices, but Australia is missing out.

Restaurants and fast food chains are being urged to display the number of calories/kilojoules beside each item on the menu. The recommendation, by the federal government's Preventative Health Task Force, is part of a raft of measures to combat obesity. However, Australia trails well behind other countries.

In the UK, Burger King (Hungry Jacks), KFC, Pizza Hut, Subway and the Harvester restaurant chain display the number of calories/kilojoules on the menu board above the counter or on the menu alongside the meals. They're part of a voluntary scheme being promoted by the UK government's food regulator, the Food Standards Agency.

Massachusetts, in the US, has enacted legislation that will require fast food and other chain restaurants from November 2010 to display the number of calories for each menu item; California has adopted similar laws to take effect from 2011. Congress is considering legislation along much the same lines that would be enforced nationally. KFC, Pizza Hut and Subway in the US already display calories on their menu boards.

CHOICE asked Hungry Jacks, McDonalds, KFC, Pizza Hut and Subway if they're considering displaying calories/kilojoules on their menu boards here.

Unanimously, and disappointingly, they have no plans to be this upfront. All the fast food chains now have nutritional information available on their websites, and some provide leaflets with this information, but this isn't much use when you're standing in the queue deciding what to order. **DAVID OAKENFULL**

CHOICE asked fast food chains if they're thinking of displaying kilojoules on their menus here – the response was disappointing.

➤ ENERGY DRINKS

Selective smarts

A new drink promises to make 'good energy'. CHOICE looks at the source of these claims.

Smart Energy, a range of drinks by well-known juice brand Spring Valley, contains as much caffeine as other energy drinks, such as Red Bull and V.

Spring Valley's TV advertisement shows a group of young people variously drinking the product while creating a stroboscope in a wasteland. The Smart Energy website asks, "What is good energy? What would you create, build, make, do? Would that thing inspire people ... Would they smile, laugh, weep, yell, throw up or high five a stranger?" It also claims "Smart Energy makes good energy".

With Spring Valley's "good energy" marketing campaign, parents and youth could be forgiven for thinking this range of drinks is a healthier alternative to other brands. However, a can of any of these energy drinks contains as much caffeine as a shot of espresso.

In general, children shouldn't be given drinks containing caffeine. They can suffer disturbed sleep patterns, bedwetting and anxiety from the caffeine in just one cup of coffee or one can of energy drink. It pays to check the nutritional label on the product.

In our previous report on energy drinks (CHOICE, September 2005) we found that drinks such as Red Bull and V had obvious appeal to kids. Energy drink sales have increased by almost 40% in the past year, according to the *Australasian Grocery Guide 2009*. Research has found that some Australian boys aged eight to 12 consumed energy drinks, and teenagers said they were having up to five cans of energy drink before sporting events.

These "smart drinks" are only smart in the way they've positioned themselves as providing 'good energy'. In reality they're no better than other energy drinks; they contain caffeine that children shouldn't have and they are loaded with added sugar, which most of us can do without.

Look out for future research by CHOICE on energy drinks.

PETA YOSHINAGA



If 1.25 million TVs were recycled, the greenhouse gas emissions conserved would be equivalent to taking 5300 cars off the road for a year.

+ SUSTAINABILITY

Drowning in e-waste

As digital TVs replace analog sets and more TVs end up in landfill, what can be done about recycling?

Approximately 1.5 million obsolete TV sets are sent to landfill each year and this number is set to escalate as the digital network rolls out, according to *Tipping Point: Australia's E-waste Crisis*, a report by the Total Environment Centre (TEC).

The report says fewer than 1% of TVs are currently recycled. Jeff Angel, TEC Director, blames poor recycling rates on the limited options available. "If you're lucky, your local council might have a collection date or you may live near one of the few recycling plants." He is calling for new regulations that put the onus on industry to ensure proper recycling mechanisms are put in place.

The switch to a digital network is set to officially start next year and continue through to 2013. The TEC report predicts an extra two million TVs will end up in landfill next year, totalling almost 19 million by 2010.

The federal government is looking at options for a national recycling scheme to deal with increasing TV and computer waste. Their decision is expected in November, but there is no time-frame for introducing legislation.



According to the report, an average cathode ray tube TV contains about 3.5kg of lead and a smaller amount of the more toxic mercury. It also argues that if 1.25 million TVs were recycled, 23,000 tonnes of CO₂ emissions would be conserved – equivalent to about 5300 cars off the road for a year.

The TEC supports a national "extended producer responsibility" approach, which would make producers responsible for collection and recycling, passing those costs on to consumers.

"Because waste management comes out of council rates, householders don't realise the more things they buy the more they have to pay for landfill," says Victoria Coleman, CHOICE Senior Sustainability Policy Officer. "A user-pays scheme might help consumers ask, 'do I need a new TV this year, or could I wait?'"

If you don't want to rush into buying a digital TV, a set-top box is a viable alternative if you have good TV reception. If after installing the set-top box you discover it doesn't work because of poor reception, you are entitled to return it. For your nearest TV recycling plant call Planet Ark on 1300 733 712, visit www.recyclingnearyou.com.au, or contact your council to find out if it collects e-waste. **PETA YOSHINAGA**

IN BRIEF

Circling the loan sharks

Queensland payday lenders have been forced to repay about \$1m to 1680 cash-strapped customers after Fair Trading Queensland found numerous breaches of the law, which included failure to adequately inform consumers of their rights and excessive interest charges. One lender was charging customers an annual interest rate of 486%.

Hangover cure

Bread and bacon are a good source of amino acids, which the body needs after alcohol consumption, according to research by Newcastle University's Centre for Life in the UK. The research also found a chemical reaction during the cooking of bacon produces an irresistible combination of taste and smell.



Cook healthier vegetables

Research recently published in the *Journal of Food Science* found boiled vegetables retain lower levels of antioxidants than the same vegetables baked, char-grilled or microwaved (without adding extra water). According to the researchers, "water is not the cook's best friend when it comes to preparing vegetables".

FORUM OF THE MONTH

Sizeable problem Our article on clothing size irregularities in the fashion industry (CHOICE, June 2009) obviously touched a nerve, given the number of responses to our forum. With no national industry standard, we found clothing manufacturers literally make up their own sizes. As a consequence, exasperated shoppers are left guessing exactly what size they are. Share your frustrating experiences of clothes shopping at www.choice.com.au/clothingsize.

INSOLVENCY

Don't go down with the ship

CHOICE outlines ways to help protect your cash and purchases when a company folds.

With the recent collapse of Kleenmaid, some CHOICE members who had paid for their goods in full found themselves without cash or purchases, having opted to store goods at the company's warehouse. It's important to be aware of some basic ways to safeguard your interests if a company from which you've purchased goods goes under. Your method of payment can make a big difference to whether you'll get your money back or not.

Buy with a credit or debit card

Customers who buy goods with a credit card or certain debit cards are generally better protected than those who pay by cash. If you have used a credit card to pay for goods in full and haven't received them, you may have a case for chargeback. On behalf of the customer, the card issuer will seek a refund from the bank of the folded company. The right of chargeback also applies to debit card customers who chose the "credit" option at the time of purchase.

Time limits for chargeback apply and may vary between financial institutions, so it's important to contact your bank or credit union as soon as possible. For example, National Australia Bank requires Visa One cardholders to notify the bank of chargeback circumstances no later than the due date shown on the statement of account, while Teachers Credit Union Visa Debit cardholders should contact the credit union within 45 days of the transaction.

American Express (Amex) cardholders should call Amex on the phone number on the back of their card no later than 120 days from the transaction date or expected date of receipt of goods. All chargebacks are considered on a case-by-case basis.

MasterCard holders should contact their card issuer within 120 days of when the transaction was debited to the account.

Visa cardholders have 120 days to initiate a chargeback and are advised to contact their card issuer as soon as possible.

Diners Club cardholders should call customer service on 1300 360 060 and dispute the charge within two months of when the transaction was debited to the account.

The only option available to customers who paid with cash or a cheque is to wait for the outcome of the administration process. The same applies to customers who used a debit card and had chosen either the "cheque" or "savings" option at the time of purchase.



What happens when a company's in trouble?

When a company goes into voluntary administration it appoints an external administrator to help plan what steps need to be taken. If nothing can be done for the company, the administrators will try to get the best outcomes for the people or groups to whom it owes money – the creditors.

How do I claim my money back? Creditors can make a claim by completing a "proof of debt" form, which can be obtained from the voluntary administrator. This is usually done to notify the voluntary administrator of your claim and enable you to vote at creditor meetings.

Vouchers If you have unused vouchers for a failed business, you are an "unsecured creditor" and must register your details and wait for the outcome of the administration process.

What about my warranty? You may be able to claim warranty on products bought after the business goes under, provided it's from the manufacturer. The Kleenmaid case was unique as the company represented both manufacturer and retailer so no warranties were honoured.

Go to the ASIC website, www.asic.gov.au/insolvency, for general information about insolvency. **PETA YOSHINAGA**

People who pay with a credit card or certain debit cards are better protected than those who pay with cash.

CHOICE Online

CHOICE has 12 interactive calculators for all your money matters. To help find out how much you could accumulate with regular savings at current interest rates, go to www.choice.com.au/savings calculator.



CORRECTION DIGITAL RADIOS

On page 38 of the July issue, the OXX Digital Classic +DAB and Roberts Stream 202 were listed as having a pause/rewind function. This is incorrect, neither have this function. Also OXX informs us their product can now be upgraded via software to allow it to pick up 32 channels, rather than the 22 at the time of testing.

+ HANDHELD GAMES CONSOLE

Too much fun

Nintendo's latest childish diversion may hook some adults as well.

CHOICE enlisted the most suitable expert tester – a 10-year-old schoolboy – to evaluate Nintendo's latest handheld gaming console and discover what's new with one of the most popular gaming devices on the planet.

The DSi is slightly smaller and lighter than the previous DS, although it has larger twin screens than the DS. New features in the DSi include an SD card slot for listening to music (AAC format), an improved Wi-Fi setup with onboard web browser, and two cameras – one on the outer shell to capture friends and one in the internal hinge for self-portraits. A combination of stylus to control the touch screen at the bottom and a directional pad and buttons make game play and selections just as simple as the previous DS.

The 0.3 megapixel camera doesn't produce great quality images, but this may not matter as the first thing your kids are likely to do when using the DSi is either manipulate and distort a face into a weird carnival mirror shape, or compare two faces to determine whether the DSi thinks the two people are cousins or siblings. You can then share these altered images online, using your wireless internet connection, or save them onto an SD removable flash card. You can also manipulate music files and your own voice to create some interesting results. Our tester was impressed with the ability to make your voice sound like a robot or budge and noted the overall sound levels were higher than on the previous DS model.

For older users, original Nintendo DS games such as the

NINTENDO DSi

Price \$299

Contact www.nintendo.com.au

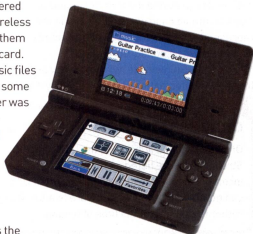


Brain Training series and cookbooks will still work with the DSi. You can also purchase games that let you take care of a virtual dog or cat, and you can play Sudoku. The DSi also has an inbuilt online application that allows you to download games using a wireless internet connection.

Be aware, however, that if your kids have a large collection of Game Boy Advance games these cartridges won't work with the DSi.

CHOICE VERDICT

If you want your kids to have the latest and greatest console to make their friends jealous, the Nintendo DSi should do the trick. However, if they already have a DS, particularly with a large collection of Game Boy Advance games, the DSi's additions may still not be enough to justify the investment. **DENIS GALLAGHER**



+ BUDGET NETBOOK

Cheap and very cheerful

An Aussie start-up company takes on the big PC brands with a super-cheap netbook.

When homegrown consumer electronics company Kogan decided to enter the computer market, it asked its customers what they wanted. This resulted in the Agora range – two lightweight models that set a new low price benchmark for the super-compact, go-anywhere netbook computer category.

The entry-level Agora Netbook, initially released at just \$499, claimed an Australian first by breaking the \$500 price barrier. The cost of that model has since dropped a further \$10. The Agora Netbook Pro is \$539, but doubles both the memory (to 2GB) and battery size (to six cells) and includes a USB Bluetooth plug-in module. Kogan keeps costs down by sourcing parts and assembling them overseas, then selling them in Australia direct to the public via its website (www.kogan.com.au).

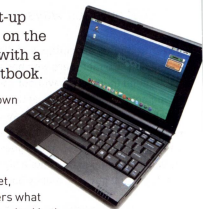
The Agora Netbook range stays true to the original netbook concept of an ultra-small, light and cheap portable computer for basic tasks and internet applications such as email and web browsing. Despite an external resemblance, don't expect the speed and features you get from a similar-sized but much higher-priced ultraportable notebook, which is more powerful and suitable for multimedia and standard office applications. The Agora Netbook weighs 1.2kg and the Agora Netbook Pro 1.5kg, making them no burden to carry with you anywhere. Both come with the Linux-based gOS 3.1 Gadgets operating system.

CHOICE VERDICT

The Kogan Agora Netbook Pro is well worth considering as a low-cost workhorse for casual, on-the-go computing.

For more on the Kogan Agora Netbook Pro, see *CHOICE Computer*, July/August 2009. To subscribe, call 1800 069 552 or go to www.choice.com.au/magazines.

STEVE DUNCOMBE



KOGAN AGORA NETBOOK PRO/NETBOOK

Price \$539

(\$489 for basic model)



+ ENERGY SAVERS

Saving by spending?

Two energy savers claim to help navigate your path to power salvation.

These two devices save reaching behind your audio-visual gear or all the peripherals around your computer to turn off the power switch, in turn saving you money on your energy bill. Both products, one a plug and the other a power board, turn off with a wireless remote. But to use wireless you need batteries for the remote and power for the device. So just how much do the power savers save?

CHOICE hooked up both products to an entertainment system and found they work well, allowing devices to be turned off from up to 10m away, with multiple obstacles in between. The Future Switch plugs into your mains socket and you plug in the power board you want to be able to turn off. Two plugs are included in the package and both work on the same frequency, so you can have two areas in the house working off the same remote.

The Belkin Conserve consists of an eight-socket power board and remote. The board plugs into a power point and you then plug your gear in the board. The Belkin claims surge protection (which we didn't test) and also has two sockets separate from the rest, so they stay on when the remote is used, meaning appliances that need to remain on, such as a router or DVR, can be plugged in and remain on when you turn the others off. You can also add more Belkin power boards and switch them to the same channel used on the remote, allowing for more devices to be turned off with the one remote.

We tested how much energy each device draws based on 19 hours of standby power, where they use energy listening for a signal, and five hours of being powered, where a current runs through to the attached appliances. Based on today's energy prices they

FUTURE SWITCH
FST2R2400-2
BELKIN CONSERVE AV
AG108040AU2M

Price \$55 / \$250

Contact www.futurerange.com.au
/ www.belkin.com/au



each cost about a dollar per year (plus battery costs) to run, whereas our configuration of appliances would use more than \$27/year in standby power. If your power switch is difficult to reach, however, one of these may save you much more in convenience.

CHOICE VERDICT

These plugs may be useful for difficult-to-reach power points, however there are cheaper alternatives. A well-positioned power board with switches attached to an extension cord can be turned off easily. These plugs are an extra piece of hardware you have to pay for, both upfront and with battery replacement and power. And do you really want another remote?

MATTHEW STEEN

For both these energy savers you'll pay extra both upfront and for batteries and power – and do you really need another remote?



UPDATE

In our test of garden lights (CHOICE, May 2009) we said we would check the solar lights' battery and panel durability. After five months' continual use, the majority of the 12 solar lights on test lost battery life. However, two of the top models from the original test didn't show any weakening, and the batteries on one model even improved.

For detailed results, go to www.choice.com.au/ solartlight. We will update the battery life scores again in six months.

COMING

Coffee grinders

For a perfect homemade coffee, coffee grinders are a smart investment along with a good espresso machine. We put 14 burr-type models to the test, including seven new models, to find out which are best for both coffee connoisseurs and amateurs.



Fridges

For the first time in our history of testing refrigerators, CHOICE is pleasantly surprised to find a model that achieves a perfect score for energy efficiency – but this comes at a cost of compromised quality in other areas.



Digital photo frames

These can condense an entire photo album into a single frame, and when we last tested them we were not very impressed with their picture quality. Like you, we were keen to find out if the larger 25cm frames are an improvement over their smaller equivalents.

GROCERY CHOICE – YOUR SAY

We've had an overwhelming response from readers to the federal government's decision to cancel Grocery CHOICE. Almost 7000 people voted in our online poll on whether they think the government is doing enough to drive competition in the grocery sector – with a whopping 98% saying "no". We also opened up our website, www.choice.com.au, for comments after the decision was announced and were deluged with consumer voices from all over Australia. Because of the overwhelming response, this month we've replaced our usual emails and letters page with just a small sample of what our readers have to say.

As a public health nutrition professional, I am disappointed the federal government pulled Grocery CHOICE. In the absence of a comprehensive food and nutrition strategy that encompasses food price monitoring as part of nutrition surveillance for the population, this website would have been a great alternative to compare grocery prices across Australia, particularly in remote areas where prices can be artificially inflated. This information could then be used for advocacy around improving equity for people of disadvantaged backgrounds. This decision is certainly not consistent with Labor philosophy and makes me regret my decision to vote in this direction.

Deanne Wooden, Qld

The Grocery CHOICE shutdown is such a disappointment when coupled with the announcement that supermarkets

may do their own site anyway. As exhibited by the fuel price spiral, market forces will never be a price control. Only a strong consumer advocate can be effective. Keep up the good fight.

Edward Ashton, NSW

Several weeks ago one of the large supermarkets donated a day's profit to a very worthy cause, but I was staggered to see they raised more than \$7 million. Profit is after wages are paid, so the mind boggles. Doesn't this really tell the story? I am sure the farmers are not getting a proper and fair price and neither is the consumer. Let's all make a day, say 21 August, as a No Shopping Day at the big two. I for one will be shopping elsewhere from now on.

Dianne Smith, Vic

As someone who lives in a small town where there is little competition, I know I pay more for my groceries

than people shopping at supermarkets in other towns. Soon we will have an ALDI, and down the track a Woolworths. These should make a big difference. I am disgusted that the government for which I voted has reneged on its election promise and capitulated to the interests of the supermarket industry. This action is a huge disappointment to many loyal supporters and a very "un-smart" thing to do, given they have many more serious decisions to make in order to get us through the current economic recession.

Rosemary Shepherd, NSW

As a food producer I am keenly interested in what appears on our supermarket shelves. I am wearying of the loss of choice and selection of Australian-made products and their subsequent replacement with cheaper supermarket-branded products sourced from overseas.

Many consumers are already poorly informed as to their shopping choices. I'm devastated that the government has compromised itself and its chance at political integrity yet again by ditching Grocery CHOICE!

Roz Brownlie, Qld

I am absolutely disgusted – although not surprised – by yet another turnaround by this government. We must fight this decision and we need to show politicians we are sick and tired of being lied to and pushed around by deceptive politicians. First Fuel Watch, now Grocery CHOICE. What next? Come on Australia – it's time. We have to show this government that enough is enough.

Carole O'Loughlin, NSW

THUMPS UP!

Shelley Guy of WA says she is impressed with the service she received from Otis sunglasses. Despite having no receipt her broken glasses were accepted with no questions asked and replaced with a brand new pair.

Steve and Yvonne Thomas of Horsham, Victoria, are delighted with Olympus who repaired and returned their digital camera free of charge.

Dennis Daly of Picnic Point, NSW, says his elderly mother purchased a Westinghouse fridge last November,

which started making a buzzing noise over the following weeks. When a technician visited, he recommended it be replaced. A new fridge arrived in a matter of days and Dennis says Electrolux/Westinghouse handled his mother's problem with consideration and care.

John Mott of East Fremantle, WA, says Canon wins a thumbs up for its outstanding product support and service. Despite his five-year-old digital camera being well out of warranty, Canon replaced a faulty part without charge.



I live in remote central Australia and the closest town is 500km away. My wife and I do our grocery shopping there every six weeks or so. It is astonishing how the prices of basic, essential items rise at both Coles and Woolworths in a six-week period. Our grocery bill seems to be rising in increments of \$20 per visit – and now their “specials” are trying to force you to purchase multiple items to get reduced prices. It’s about time the government recognise that the average person is really beginning to hurt in the hip pocket.

Steve Weatherill, SA

Well done to CHOICE and your CEO for having the courage of your convictions to berate the government over this decision. Very poor form from the government, Minister Craig Emerson and the PM himself! Who are the biggest losers here? The consumers.

Patricia Veevers, Vic

I was sceptical of the concept at first, but once I heard CHOICE was taking on the project, I was happy. I know we could be getting better prices, but without competition and transparency,

how can this happen? CHOICE is a fantastic consumer advocate and obviously big supermarkets were threatened by the thought of transparency and CHOICE. I thought we would get a better deal with Labor than kowtowing to big business.

Rebecca Plush, NSW

It’s not the government’s role to promote competition. By its very nature, competition is created when people and/or corporations innovate. There will always be a place in the market for big and small players. Creating a website that purports to promote competition is counter-intuitive to my mind. The savings over the long run are just not worth changing your shopping habits to track down the cheapest deal.

David Flack, Vic

I was disappointed the Fuel Watch website didn’t get up, and now Grocery CHOICE has also been aborted thanks to the politicians. Competition is vital in creating value for consumers but consumers need to be able to compare products and vote with their feet. I use the unit pricing system now when I

shop. It is extremely quick and helpful in comparing item value.

The Rudd government started office with an immense amount of goodwill and support but is slowly eroding its position. Grocery CHOICE was not about the government or the supermarkets; it’s about empowering the consumer.

Rob Hunter, NSW

I do think CHOICE has the very best of intentions, but I’m glad the government decided not to waste any more money on this scheme. Unless Grocery CHOICE had provided minute-by-minute advice of price changes (like any of the ASX monitors) it would have been worthless. Or worse than worthless – it would have had outdated information paid for by taxpayers. The government has wasted enough of my taxes this year, and given its propensity to spend money at the drop of a hat on any scheme likely to earn brownie points, you have to believe that Grocery CHOICE really was a failure if this government was prepared to drop it.

David Robertson, ACT

All the power is with the supermarkets and none with the consumer. We the consumers need as many weapons as we can get, and

Grocery CHOICE would have been a valuable weapon. Unit pricing is another. I already shop at several supermarkets and would have been happy to do this more, based on better information.

Peter Campbell, Vic

LETTER OF THE MONTH

Collective power

Those who argue the site would not be used miss the point; the very existence of the site would apply downward pressure on prices. Besides, those who chose not to use the site would be simply foolish. It would make perfect sense to check the stores in your area, using a sample of the products you use on a regular basis. I recently used CHOICE to find the best value oil-filled heater.

I was able to check five different retailers in my area; the one I chose gave a further 20% discount on the already lowest price. In the face of yet more broken promises by politicians it is time for us to exert people power. Too often we forget we do have collective power, and not just at election time.

Anthony McKenzie, ACT



LETTER OF THE MONTH This month’s winner receives *The CHOICE Guide to Digital Photography*, or any other book of his choice (www.choice.com.au/books). Unfortunately we don’t have the resources to answer all the emails and letters we receive. We may edit or print only an extract of emails and letters in the magazine.

CHOICE will soon launch a campaign for fair supermarket prices for consumers. If you would like to be involved, please let us know at www.choice.com.au/supermarkets.

Our regular Emails & Letters page will resume next month. Email ausconsumer@choice.com.au or mail to Letters, 57 Carrington Road, Marrickville, NSW 2204.

Misadventures in medicine

Our reliance on medicines has dramatically increased, and mixing them can prove a dangerous cocktail. CHOICE explains who's at risk and why.



NUTSHELL

>> Many elderly people are at risk of adverse events from medicines, many of which result in hospital admissions.

>> There are several steps you, your doctor and pharmacist can take to manage your medication regimens.

>> CHOICE is calling for systemic changes to reduce the incidence of medication-related problems.

Next time you go to Gran's house, check out her medicine cabinet – you might be surprised to see how many different pills she's popping each day. In fact, if she's like many elderly people, she'll be taking at least five. While she's most likely been instructed to take them by health professionals, research shows many elderly people are taking medicines that are unnecessary or possibly even harmful individually or in combination with other medicines. Conversely, some people are suffering the effects of under-dosing because they can't afford medicines they've been prescribed. CHOICE investigates adverse events associated with medication, explaining who's at risk, the sorts of problems and issues that arise, and what can be done to prevent them.

How big is the problem and who's affected?

The numbers around medication-related problems are staggering. Adverse drug events account for more than 400,000 GP visits and 140,000 hospital admissions annually. These figures are conservative and don't necessarily include hospitalisations for injuries such as car accidents or falls that may have been a result of medication issues.

The most commonly implicated drugs are cardiovascular medicines, anticoagulants, anti-inflammatories and chemotherapy medicines, and while it's hard to put a total dollar cost to the health system of medication-related problems, hospital admissions alone have been estimated at \$380 million. Yet it's estimated about half of these hospitalisations are avoidable.

People most likely to be affected are those who: take five or more medicines; use 12 or more doses per day; have had significant recent changes to their treatment regimen; require ongoing monitoring of medication effects; have language difficulties, problems with dexterity, poor

eyesight or dementia; or attend several different doctors. Many older people fit one or more of these criteria. Not only are they more likely to suffer adverse drug events, but their recovery is likely to be poorer. The imperative, therefore, is to get medication regimens right.

Why so many problems?

People are using more medicines than ever before, with the average number of daily drug doses per person more than doubling in the past 20 years. There are several reasons for this, including the trend to treat single conditions with several drugs, and the sad fact that many of the lifestyle conditions on the increase (such as heart disease, high cholesterol, high blood pressure and diabetes) are more conveniently treated with medicines than with a better diet or more exercise (see Lifestyle Medication, page 14). We're also living longer and acquiring more health conditions along the way that need treatment.

Prescription medicines, while helpful in treating or preventing relevant health conditions, often have side effects, and sometimes the side-effect costs outweigh the benefits of the drug. A classic example is benzodiazepines. Prescribed to help people sleep, they also increase the risk of falls and broken bones in elderly people.

CONTACTS

The National Prescribing Service is a government-funded body responsible for providing health professionals and members of the public with information and advice about medicines. It has a lot of useful information for consumers, including the printable, wallet-sized Medicines List and Consumer Medicine Information. Visit www.nps.org.au, or phone 1300 888 763.

Polypharmacy is the term for people taking many medications – an accepted clinical definition being five or more. It's estimated up to 40% of Australians over 65 are on five or more medications, sometimes with dire consequences. If all drugs have a small chance of side effects, taking a combination increases the overall risk and introduces the additional danger of interactions between medicines. One example is warfarin, a commonly prescribed anticoagulant that interacts with some anti-fungal pills and creams, anti-arrhythmic drugs, thyroid drugs and diuretics, among others, to increase the risk of bleeding. Over-the-counter medicines such as aspirin, and herbal medicines such as St John's wort can also interact with prescription medicines.

On the other hand, taking a few different medicines for some conditions can help reduce the dose of each, and therefore the risk of side effects. And when treating infectious diseases, such as tuberculosis and HIV, multiple drugs can reduce the development of drug resistant strains. However, drug combinations in these sorts of situations have usually been adequately tested.

Good medicine, bad medicine

When prescribed appropriately, medicine is usually helpful for most people – but not always. When in doubt about the potential effects of a particular medicine on a patient, a doctor often relies on information from clinical trials, journal articles and drug company advice. They may also be influenced by marketing and promotions, opinion leaders and treatment guidelines that recommend prescribing for specific diseases without taking individual circumstances into account.

There is plenty of evidence to suggest pharmaceutical representatives and other forms of promotion have a heavy influence on prescribing habits (see Promotion Overdose, *CHOICE*, September 2008). The consequence is increased prescribing of expensive new drugs (whose benefits and side effects are often uncertain) and decreased prescribing of older, more cost-effective generic drugs.

Elderly at risk In 1991, the Beers Criteria, a list of medicines considered inappropriate for elderly people, was developed by geriatrician Dr Mark H. Beers. It has been updated and reviewed since then, most recently in 2003. The risks of medicines on this list, which include sedatives, muscle relaxants, antihistamines and antidepressants, are greater than any potential benefits. A study in 2005 found 21% of Australian veterans aged 70 or older were prescribed at least one of the medicines on the list in the previous three months.

Part of the problem is that in the drug trial phase, they're likely to be tested on people with a single condition rather than those with multiple conditions taking a variety of medicines. Middle-aged men are often chosen due to

CASE STUDY

Repeat scripts spark alarm

Taking his father for a medicine review revealed a major flaw in prescribing practices. Andrew Ross* tells his story.

"My late father was an elderly man with his faculties intact. He used to line up all his medications and take them one or two at a time, depending on the instructions. After one series of dosages, he would line up the next and set his alarm clock so as not to forget, and so on. He knew why he was taking each medication, and showed me his bathroom cabinet which was full of nothing but medicines."

Despite his father's objections, Andrew made an appointment for both of them to see his father's doctor, who was dumbfounded to discover how many and what medications he was taking. "When he asked why, Dad replied, 'I had the repeats and you never said to stop taking them,'" says Andrew.

The doctor then alerted everyone in the practice to their duty of care regarding prescribing medications, particularly repeat prescriptions. The doctor had assumed patients would stop taking one medicine when prescribed another.

"The doctor, a GP who specialises in geriatrics, has since discussed this with his peers and discovered almost none told patients when to stop taking medicines, unless there was a contraindication," says Andrew.

* Not his real name



otherwise reasonable health and no confounding hormonal effects. Once the drugs are out in the real world, however, unknown problems may surface. The National Prescribing Service (NPS) recommends trying a dose half that of a typical adult dose when prescribing for older people.

Unnecessary medicines Sometimes doctors may feel it's not their responsibility to withdraw medications prescribed by another doctor, so patients may be prescribed something for a temporary condition that has since resolved. A *CHOICE* member alerted us to another problem resulting from lack of clear communication between doctor and patient: that of when to stop taking medications with repeat prescriptions (see Repeat Scripts Spark Alarm, above). This has also led to patients being prescribed a new brand of a particular medicine – or given a generic instead of a brand – but taking both the old and the new.

A review of 31 studies looking at withdrawing certain medications from older patients found that in many cases, >

Did you know?

It can be worth shopping around for prescription medicines – prices can vary from pharmacy to pharmacy. Also, see www.choice.com.au/generic for our list of cheaper generic options. For optimal medical care, though, once you've found a "cheap" pharmacy it's a good idea to stick with that one for all your prescription and non-prescription medicines.

Did you know?

With 1.6 million people affected by medication-related problems in various ways, it is a significant community issue.

LIFESTYLE MEDICATION

The latest figures show the majority of the 10 most commonly prescribed Pharmaceutical Benefits Scheme medicines – the ones the government pays for – are for conditions that are often lifestyle-related.

Poor diet, being overweight, smoking, excessive alcohol and lack of exercise all contribute to high blood pressure and heart disease. Medications to treat these comprise three of the top 10 medicines prescribed. Three kinds of proton pump inhibitors, taken to reduce the effects of gastro-oesophageal reflux and stomach ulcers, also make the top 10 and cost the taxpayer more than \$250 million per year. Dietary factors, cigarettes, alcohol, obesity and overeating can cause reflux, or make it worse, as can medications for blood pressure, anticholinergics and anti-inflammatories.

Two of the top 10 medicines prescribed are statins, costing taxpayers more than \$1 billion per year. They're taken to reduce cholesterol levels and the risk of heart disease. A better diet and more exercise could substantially reduce this bill.

Medication for managing type 2 diabetes, the latest lifestyle-related disease epidemic, comes in at number 10, with 2.7 million prescriptions per year.

These illnesses and conditions can't always be prevented or managed with lifestyle changes, but many can. People often find it more convenient to "pop a pill" than change their lifestyle, and doctors know that withholding medicine will simply mean ill-health and higher costs later in the form of hospital admissions, disability and premature death.

antihypertensives, benzodiazepines and antipsychotics could be successfully reduced or eliminated with no adverse effects, and sometimes lead to improvement in quality of life. In another study, GPs were trained to review medications of elderly people, and following that training were able to successfully reduce the number of medications taken by their patients.

Why people under-medicate

So far, the problems discussed refer largely to over-medication, where too much, too many or the wrong kinds of medicines are taken. Another significant issue is under-medication. There are several reasons for people not taking medicines, including confusion and forgetfulness, or neglect on the part of their carer. Medical professionals may have prescribed too low a dose, or have missed a condition. Patients who suffer side effects may also stop taking medicines, as, conversely, do patients who "feel better".

It's estimated about one in five adults with chronic illness skips a dose or doesn't fill a prescription due to cost. Many older people, and others who require lots of medicine, have a concessionary status that entitles them to low-cost medicines. They pay a nominal amount for prescriptions, called a co-payment, and when they (or their family) have spent a certain amount – up to the safety net threshold – in a one-year period, prescriptions are free for the rest of that year.

Even a small increase in the co-payment amount can reduce medicine taking. In 2005, an increase from \$3.70 to \$4.60 had a noticeable effect on the number of prescriptions being filled, with low-income members of the community choosing to forgo certain medicines.

Subsequent research on this found the greatest drop was for medicines prescribed for chronic but asymptomatic conditions, such as anti-platelet medicine (to prevent blood clots), osteoporosis treatments, combination (prevention and symptom control) asthma medicines and proton-pump inhibitors (used to treat gastro-oesophageal reflux). While some of these can be replaced by over-the-counter medicines, there's no way of knowing to what extent this occurred.

Taking medicines incorrectly

Lack of information, instructions that are difficult to understand and complex regimens can lead to patients not taking medicines correctly. Consumer Medicine Information (CMI) leaflets are available from pharmacists, doctors and the National Prescribing Service (see Contacts, page 12) for all prescription medicines (they're sometimes found in the medicine's packaging), but are not always offered or asked for.

Nor do prescribers always get it right. Australian researchers found that 10% of adults with chronic illness were given the wrong medicine or dose in the previous year. Other research has found about 20% of prescriptions among the general community were of the incorrect dose.

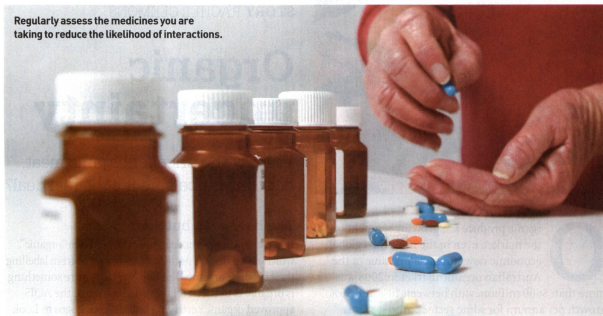
Take control of your medicine chest

There's no single solution to the problem of adverse drug events and/or over- and under-medication. What's needed is a greater recognition of the problems caused by polypharmacy, and a move to reduce prescription of unnecessary medicines involving patients and health professionals, as well as systemic changes.

Geriatrician Professor David Le Couteur recommends the following strategies.

- Have a single doctor – usually your GP – manage and oversee all your medical issues and medications.
- If any new symptom occurs, consider whether this might be due to an adverse reaction to a medication.

Regularly assess the medicines you are taking to reduce the likelihood of interactions.



It's estimated about one in five adults with chronic illness skips a dose or doesn't fill a script due to cost.

- Discuss with your doctor (or pharmacist) whether new medications are justified and current medications still required.

Conduct a medicine audit It's important to regularly assess all the medicines you're taking – not just prescription products, but also over-the-counter and herbal medicines, and even dietary supplements. This can reduce the likelihood of interactions, or taking unnecessary or inappropriate medicines (see Repeat Scripts Spark Alarm, page 13).

The US has "brown-bag days", where elderly people take all their medicines to their doctor to check for necessity and inter-drug interactions, as well as expired use-by dates. This simple but effective approach could be useful here.

People whose medication regime puts them at risk of misadventure – including polypharmacy, age, recent hospitalisation, recent changes to medication and/or having multiple doctors – are entitled to a Medicare-funded Home Medicines Review. In cooperation with the patient's GP, a suitably qualified pharmacist visits the patient at home, reviews their medication regimen and provides the GP with a report. The GP and patient then agree on a medication management plan. Talk to your doctor or pharmacist about this service.

Be fully informed about your medicines Take them only as directed. If your doctor hasn't explained how they should be taken, or you've forgotten, ask the pharmacist. For complex medication regimes, ask the doctor or pharmacist to put it in writing.

Read the prescription label when you get the medicine, and confirm your understanding of it with the pharmacist. If it's a new medicine, make sure you're aware of any possible side effects. Ask for the CMI leaflet if it's not included with

the medicine. If your new medicine makes you feel unwell, tell your doctor. Inform your doctor of all medicines you're taking, including over-the-counter medicines and herbal remedies and supplements. They may seem harmless because they're not prescribed, but they can interact with other medicines.

Ask your doctor about lifestyle changes that may help reduce the need for medication (diet, exercise, relaxation, counselling).

What CHOICE wants

- Greater recognition of and adherence to Beers Criteria medicines when prescribing for the elderly.
- Greater consideration of non-pharmacological therapies in conjunction with or instead of drugs.
- Improved prescribing and dispensing software. A test conducted by the NPS of commonly used prescribing software found many of them didn't pick up key drug interactions, or else had so many false alarms they could lead to health professionals ignoring all alarms.
- A reduction in the role of pharmaceutical marketing to doctors and in hospitals, and also reduced role of drug companies in creating treatment guidelines. The problems of bias and influence arising from drug information provided by pharmaceutical companies were examined in Prescription Overdose, *CHOICE*, September 2008.
- A review of the role of pharmacists in primary care. As more health professionals acquire prescribing rights, pharmacists will increasingly become gatekeepers for individuals' medication regimes. Research has shown closer collaboration between GPs and pharmacists, and improved medication review by pharmacists, can help identify and resolve medication-related problems. ■



STORY RACHEL CLEMONS

Organic uncertainty

You pay the price for organic meat, but can you be sure it's the real deal?

NUTSHELL

>> In Australia anyone can use the term "organic". The only way to be sure of a meat's organic pedigree is to buy certified.

>> Look for the logo of certification bodies or ask the butcher who certifies the meat you're buying. If they can't tell you, or the meat seems incredibly cheap, it may not be certified organic.

Organic produce is a growing segment of the market, even in the midst of a global economic downturn. Retail value of the Australian organic market in 2008 was more than \$600 million, with between 10% and 30% growth per annum for some sectors. And it seems organic meat producers are leading the way, with reports of record sales in recent months and a forecast of increasing market share. One explanation put forward is that despite having to tighten our belts and eat more home-cooked meals, we're reluctant to give up the gourmet food we've been eating in restaurants during the good times, so we're willing to splurge on a nice cut of organic meat.

Organic meat is expensive to produce so you'd expect to pay a premium for it. You may also believe meat from free-range animals raised without the standard use of synthetic chemicals is worth the extra money. But how can you be sure you're getting what you pay for?

CHOICE visited butchers in Sydney and Melbourne who advertise themselves as purveyors of organic meat to find out what they know about the meat they sell. We discovered that many spin an ill-informed line about their organic products. We also found that price is generally a good indicator of the real thing.

DID YOU KNOW?

Producers require a minimum of three years' organic land management before they can be certified organic. In the first year of conversion, produce may not be marketed as organic, but in the second and third years it can be sold as "in conversion to organic" (and must be clearly labelled as such), following a successful audit. Meat, however, must come from animals

that have lived their entire lives on certified land. During conversion the outlay is often significantly greater than the income, so buying "in conversion" products can help support the producer during this time. As they both use the same production methods, the price of "in conversion" products and their certified organic counterparts will generally be similar.

The beef with butchers

In Australia, there's no legislation for the term "organic", which means there's nothing to stop anyone from labelling their produce organic. The only way to ensure something is organic is to check it is certified by one of the AQIS-approved organic certifying bodies – see Logos to Look For, opposite. Of the 42 outlets CHOICE surveyed that appeared to sell "organic" meat, 13 either sell organic produce but not meat, or the meat they sell isn't actually organic (they seem to think free-range or hormone-free beef and organic beef are the same). Only 29 told us they sell certified organic beef so we focused on these.

Once we'd established the butcher was selling certified organic beef, we asked the straightforward question, "Who certifies it?". Only 11 of 29 retailers answered correctly. Seven didn't know or couldn't reply directly but referred our buyers to certification logos on brochures or posters displayed on the wall. Eight gave an incorrect or muddled answer. For example, one butcher replied, "Enviroganic Farm", which is actually a supplier of certified organic produce, not a certifier. Another answered, "Rural Organics", an organisation that assists farmers, processors and exporters with their entry into the organic and biodynamic markets. A third said, "the RSPCA", but the RSPCA Approved Farming Scheme is specific to animal welfare. None of these are organic certifying bodies. The final three retailers had no information at all about who certifies their organic beef, which raises the question: is the meat on sale at these butchers really certified organic?

According to our buyers, only about half the retailers seemed knowledgeable about organics. Generally, these butchers were able to tell our buyers where their beef came from and/or who certified it, and in some cases volunteered additional information about organic meat – the difference between organic and conventionally farmed meat, its certification requirements and its supposed nutritional benefits. About two-thirds of the retailers gave our buyers the impression they were confident of what they were telling them, but unfortunately they weren't always passing on

LOGOS TO LOOK FOR

The only way to be sure the food you're buying is truly organic is to choose foods that are certified organic. There are seven organic certifying organisations approved by AQIS.



AUS-QUAL Limited (AUSQUAL,
a subsidiary of AUS-MEAT),
1800 630 890/07 3361 9233
www.ausqual.com.au



**Safe Food Production
Queensland (SFQ)**,
07 3253 9800
www.safefood.qld.gov.au



**National Association for Sustainable
Agriculture Australia (NASAA)**,
08 8370 8455
www.nasaa.com.au



**Tasmanian Organic-dynamic
Producers (TOP)**,
03 6381 2004
www.tasorganicdynamic.com.au



Australian Certified Organic
(ACO, a subsidiary of Biological
Farmers of Australia),
07 3350 5706
www.australianorganic.com.au



Organic Food Chain (OFC),
07 4637 2600
www.organicfoodchain.com.au



**Bio-Dynamic Research
Institute (BDRI)**,
03 5966 7333
www.demeter.org.au

There's no legislation in Australia for the term 'organic', meaning there's nothing to stop anyone from labelling their product organic.

accurate information. The butchers who assured our buyers that the RSPCA, Envirogenic Farm and Rural Organics are organic certifying bodies are three such examples.

Paying a premium

Organic food is often expensive because production is more labour-intensive and, without herbicides, pesticides and other chemicals, the yield (for crops, specifically) is generally lower than for conventional foods. We found prices for the same cut of meat can vary widely from butcher to butcher, so it's worth shopping around. Beware of very cheap organic meat, however, as there's a good chance it's not certified or organic. We suspect this was the case with some of the rump steak we bought at bargain basement prices. The average price for organic rump was about \$35 per kilo and ranged up to \$69 per kilo, but a

few butchers sold it to us for about \$23 per kilo. Despite assuring us the beef was certified, these butchers couldn't tell us who certified their meat and didn't have any brochures or posters displaying certification information.

The most expensive organic meat we saw was for New York steak at \$89 per kilo, although about \$42 per kilo for this cut was more common. Organic chicken breast fillets cost between \$24.90 and \$42.90 per kilo.

One thing's certain: organic meat does cost more than conventionally produced meat. When CHOICE last looked at organic produce (August 2007) we found you could pay half as much again for organic beef in supermarkets as you would for conventional beef (\$30.50-\$35 per kilo for organic scotch fillet compared with \$20-\$27 per kilo for conventional; \$14-\$15 per kilo for organic mince compared with \$10-\$12 per kilo for >

'Certified organic' is the best guarantee you'll be getting genuine organic meat.

JARGON BUSTER

The A-W of organic meat

The following words or descriptions are often used in association with gourmet-type meats on product packaging as well as restaurant menus, but what do they really mean and is their use regulated?

Angus is a cattle breed developed in Scotland in the late 1700s. It has a smooth, close-grained texture, carnation red colour and finely marbled fat within the lean muscle. Certified Australian Angus Beef (CAAB) is an industry quality assurance program – by buying products carrying the CAAB logo you're guaranteed Angus genetics and beef produced to exacting specifications.

Bio-dynamic farmers use a form of organic agriculture that places strong emphasis on ecological harmony and environmental sustainability and treats the farm as a total organism. Bio-dynamic food is grown with particular composts, preparations and natural activating substances.

Grain-fed animals are kept in a feedlot for at least 100 days and fed for a minimum of 80 days on a nutritionally balanced, high energy grain-based feed. This uniform feeding regime results in a consistent meat and fat colour, and often high levels of marbling. Minimum standards and certification for grain-fed beef are administered through the National Feedlot Accreditation Scheme and audited by AUS-MEAT, the industry body responsible for establishing and maintaining national standards for meat production and processing.

Marble score This is the grading of intramuscular fat [also known



If your butcher doesn't know who certifies the meat, it may not be organic.

as marbling) in beef. The higher the score, the more intramuscular fat – in Australia, marble scores range from 1 to 9+. Marbling has a positive effect on eating quality in many high value cuts, where often the higher the marble score the better the product and the higher the price it sells for. But it's possible to achieve good eating quality without marbling.

MSA graded Meat Standards Australia (MSA) is a consumer-based eating quality assurance program that grades beef and sheep meat (three, four or five star) and recommends a cooking method. More than 70,000 consumers have participated in MSA testing, providing scores on 520,000 beef samples from 52,000 individual cuts to establish the standards. Program participants (from meat brands and processors through to retailers and restaurants) are licensed to use the MSA trademark and certify products via an approved quality management system in accordance with MSA standards.

Pasture-fed animals are raised on open grazing land with access to water and supplemental feed, comprising a mix of grasses. It's promoted as a more natural alternative to grain-assisted feeding programs. All certified organic beef is pasture-fed. **Wagyu** is a group of cattle breeds from Japan that is genetically predisposed to intense marbling – higher fat content – and has a higher percentage of the healthier unsaturated fat than any other cattle breed in the world. Wagyu beef is increasingly seen in restaurants, butchers and grocers around Australia and is considered a luxury item – you can reportedly pay up to \$250 per kilo for the best cuts and 9+ marble scores. Currently in Australia, beef can be labelled "Wagyu" with only 50% Wagyu genetics (known in the industry as a Crossbreed or F1). The industry's Australian Wagyu Association runs a certification system that identifies commercial cattle sired by registered full-blood or purebred Wagyu sires.

conventional). And a recent price comparison of organic and conventional beef at Coles and Woolworths online shopping sites showed a similar difference.

Organic meat in supermarkets

Woolworths' own brand of organic meat is certified by the Australian Certified Organic (ACO) scheme (see Logos to Look For, page 17). The main suppliers of organic meat to Woolworths are Cleavers The Organic Meat Company and Brismeat (a Woolworths subsidiary). A Woolworths' spokesperson told us "both suppliers are required to maintain standards specified by the ACO as well as Woolworths' internal quality control policy".

Coles is a certified retailer under the ACO scheme, which means the chain of custody for its organic products goes all the way from the farm to its shelves, but information about its organic suppliers is commercially confidential. "We are very serious about our organic meats and take all appropriate steps to ensure our organic meat is authentic, certified and traceable for our customers," says a Coles spokesperson. "We have ACO check these certifications and our customers can trust the certification logo and retailer number."

ACO certification labels display a code number specific to the food product's processor (such as Cleavers) or retailer (Coles). If you have any queries relating to a particular batch of meat, you can find the name and contact details for that processor or retailer by doing a product search on the ACO website.

Why 'certified' label is key

To safeguard Australia's organic export markets, the Australian Quarantine and Inspection Service (AQIS) accredits a number of organisations to certify organic foods that comply with its National Standard for Organic and Bio-Dynamic Produce. Australian consumers benefit indirectly from this regulation.

As you pay a premium for organic meat, you should know what you're buying, and certified organic is the best guarantee you'll get what you pay for. If organic meat seems really cheap it's reasonable to question its authenticity. If there's no certified organic label, ask the retailer where it comes from and who certifies it. If they can't or won't tell you, then it may not be certified organic. It also helps to know what other gourmet meat descriptions mean (see Jargon Buster, opposite).

Standards Australia is currently developing a standard for organic and biodynamic products. While this new standard won't be mandatory it will provide clearer guidelines for enforcement agencies such as the Australian Competition & Consumer Commission enabling them to take action against misleading organic claims. ■

BETTER FOR YOU?

The debate about whether organic food is more nutritious and generally better for you than conventional food is long running. When CHOICE last reported on the topic in 2007 the jury was still out. Since then two major studies into organic food have been published.

Researchers from The Organic Center in the US assessed studies published in scientific literature from 1980 through to 2007 that compared the nutrient levels in organic and conventional plant-based foods – a review of 97 studies and 236 valid matched pairs (of organic and conventionally produced food). It found the organic foods were nutritionally superior in 61% of the cases, while the conventional foods were more nutrient-dense in 37%. The organic samples contained higher concentrations of the nutritionally desirable polyphenols and antioxidants (food components thought to be beneficial to health) in about three-quarters of the 59 matched pairs where these components were measured.

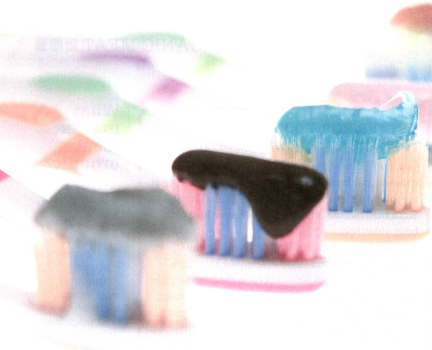
The recently released, \$31 million European Union-funded QualityLowInputFood (QLIF) project started in 2004 and ran for five years. It was the first to systematically investigate the physiology of crops (wheat, potato, cabbage, onion and lettuce) farmed conventionally and organically side-by-side on a 300ha farm in England. The field trials found organic versions contained more of the nutritionally desirable food components (such as antioxidants and vitamins) at higher levels, but some compounds were unaffected and others were higher in conventional crops (such as vitamin E in wheat and carotenoids in potato, cabbage and lettuce).

QLIF also conducted an extensive milk quality survey of different dairy production systems in Denmark, Sweden, the UK and Italy. It showed that milk from organic grazing-based dairy systems has significantly higher levels of the nutritionally desirable unsaturated fatty acids (such as the omega-3 fatty acids) and fat soluble antioxidants (such as beta carotene) compared with milk from conventional production methods. This is consistent with previous research on this topic.

While these studies suggest organic food can be better for you, the research focuses on small numbers of foods and nutrients so it's unreasonable to generalise the trend to all produce. Evidence of the beneficial impact of organic dairy production is more conclusive, but it's still not clear if the same differences translate to often very different Australian farming practices.

What makes meat organic?

Organic meat must comply with the National Standard for Organic and Bio-Dynamic Produce. Among other requirements, the livestock must range freely on pasture, not be given growth promoters (including antibiotics), eat feed produced without synthetic pesticides, have no genetically modified inputs, and the soil and water management must comply with the standard.



STORY KATE BROWNE

Not so natural toothpastes

Read the fine print, and you'll find some 'natural' toothpastes may not be as pure as you think.

NUTSHELL

>> "Natural" and "herbal" toothpastes are now found not only in health food stores, but also chemists and supermarkets.

>> Many of the so-called "natural" brands aren't so different from conventional toothpaste, yet they're often far more expensive.

A trip down any supermarket aisle will reveal a mind-boggling array of toothpastes, with prices varying from \$1.40 to \$10. They sport shiny packaging and equally slick promises such as "extreme clean", "breath-freshening strips" and "12 hours of protection". Then there's the growing market in alternative toothpastes, mainly catering to those hoping to avoid fluoride and other chemical additives conventional toothpastes generally contain.

The problem is that many of the so-called "natural" or "herbal" products CHOICE found are made up of very similar ingredients to their mainstream counterparts, the main omission being fluoride. Yet you can easily pay up to four times the price per 100gm for these alternatives. The most expensive herbal toothpaste we found was a staggering \$12.

Fluoride factors

While the absence of fluoride is the common link in all the natural toothpastes we found, most experts argue this is the one vital ingredient toothpaste should contain. Philippa Sawyer, a paediatric dentist and spokesperson for the Australian Dental Association, and Professor Mike Morgan, Chair of Population Oral Health at the Melbourne Dental School, Melbourne University, both advise against fluoride-free toothpastes. In fact, Morgan believes there are just two things to consider in your purchasing decision. "Look for toothpaste that has fluoride in it; after that the decision should really just be driven by price."

While Sawyer believes people usually choose natural toothpaste because they want to avoid fluoride and the foaming agent sodium lauryl sulphate, we found many of the natural and herbal toothpastes on the market contain sodium lauryl sulphate or an alternative detergent (see Jargon Buster, opposite).

Sawyer says this can irritate the mouth and make it sore, but only in a tiny percentage of people. If you're prone to skin sensitivity aggravated by sodium lauryl sulphate it's possible to find fluoridated toothpastes without it.

Of the 21 natural toothpastes we found on the market, five contain sodium lauryl sulphate, while four more contain sodium lauryl sarcosinate which can also be an irritant. Another two brands use lauryl glucoside or lauryl polyglycose, which are far milder. Many use abrasives such as silica and various gums to bind the product together, as is the case with mainstream products. Many of the natural pastes contain sorbitol, which is used primarily as a humectant to keep the paste from drying out but is also an artificial sweetener.

Brush up on the facts

The antibacterial ingredient triclosan in some toothpaste claims to provide antibacterial protection for up to 12 hours after brushing. Concerns have been raised about its inclusion in toothpaste, however, and triclosan was recently reviewed by the National Industrial Chemicals Notification and Assessments Scheme (NICNAS). A spokesperson for NICNAS told CHOICE the levels of triclosan used in toothpastes in Australia are below those at which any detrimental health effects have been observed. None of the natural toothpastes we found contained triclosan.

Where mainstream toothpastes generally contain artificial flavours and colours, the natural products tend to use essential oils such as peppermint, lemon, fennel, parsley and sage for flavour. Most of the natural brands don't use colouring, except one that contains titanium dioxide, the whitening agent used in most conventional toothpastes, two that use chlorophyll and another CI42090, an artificial colouring agent used to make products a brilliant blue. The truly herbal brands,

which don't contain many chemicals and include a smorgasbord of herbs, offer very little in the way of abrasives or plaque-resisting elements. The experts CHOICE spoke to say such toothpastes will probably provide very little benefit to the teeth.

While some natural toothpaste brands allow consumers to avoid certain ingredients, artificial flavours and colours, holistic dentist Prue King believes the most important element in dental care is a good brushing and flossing technique. "Toothpaste isn't essential. It helps with the taste and freshness of breath afterwards."

Read the packaging

With such a wide range of toothpastes on the market it's important to know what's really necessary and what's just marketing hype. The most important ingredient is fluoride, which is critical to maintaining healthy teeth. Most natural toothpastes are not going to provide the necessary fluoride and many will come with a hefty price tag to boot.

If you use one of the natural toothpastes, we advise you read the packaging carefully and use our Jargon Buster below to identify the various ingredients. It is also recommended you use a mouth rinse afterwards that contains fluoride.

To read more about fluoride in toothpaste and the water supply, go to www.choice.com.au/fluoride. ■

! FLUORIDE – THE FACTS

Fluoride protects your teeth in three ways. It improves the chemical structure of the enamel, making it more resistant to acid, reduces the ability of bacteria on your teeth to produce acid and promotes repair of early damage to the enamel.

According to Philippa Sawyer from the Australian Dental Association, fluoride should be the first consideration when choosing a toothpaste, no matter how old you are. "There's a misconception out there that fluoride is just for kids, but everyone needs it. A small, constant intake is perfect." She says Australian guidelines for adults recommend twice daily brushing using a pea-sized amount on the brush. Applying topical fluoride when brushing removes plaque and gives a fluoride treatment.

Too much fluoride can cause dental fluorosis, a condition

where the teeth's enamel surface becomes mottled in appearance. Most fluorosis is mild and doesn't damage teeth, and occurs only during tooth development in early childhood, so older children and adults aren't at risk. Although it's more common in fluoridated areas, it can occur in other areas as well.

Most fluorosis seems to be associated with children swallowing too much fluoride. Fluorosis levels have halved since the early 1990s, with the wider use of low-fluoride children's toothpastes and recommendations that kids in areas where water is fluoridated use only very small amounts of toothpaste – no more than a pea-sized smear of low-fluoride toothpaste until the age of six. It's also important to supervise young children when they are using toothpaste so they don't eat large quantities.

JARGON BUSTER

Translating the toothpaste tube

Abrasives For efficient tooth cleaning, toothpaste needs to be mildly abrasive. The abrasives we found in natural toothpastes are calcium carbonate, calcium hydrogen phosphate, sodium bicarbonate, dicalcium phosphate dehydrate, silica and sodium chloride.

Humectants stop toothpaste hardening when it's exposed to air. The common humectants we found in natural toothpastes are polyethylene glycols, glycerol and sorbitol (also artificial sweeteners).

Binders disperse or swell in the presence of water and are used to stabilise the toothpaste by preventing separation of the solid and liquid phases. Binding agents in natural toothpaste include natural gums such as arabic, tragacanth, xanthan and carrageenan. We also found corn starch

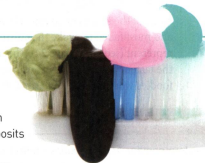
extract, CMC (sodium carboxymethyl cellulose) and cellulose.

Detergents lower the surface tension and therefore help loosen plaque deposits and emulsify or suspend the debris removed from the tooth surface during cleaning. The detergents we found in some natural toothpaste brands are sodium lauryl sulphate which, along with sodium lauryl sarcosinate, can irritate the skin. Lauryl polyglucose and lauryl glucoside are milder detergents.

Flavours found in natural toothpastes are peppermint, fennel or liquorice, and the essential oils anise, clove, caraway, pimento, eucalyptus, citrus, menthol, nutmeg, thyme, cinnamon, sweet orange.

Preservatives Microbial contamination is restricted by a low water activity and

the inclusion of preservatives such as hydroxyl-benzoates or methyl-paraben. **Antibacterial agents** can be added to help prevent gingivitis. In natural toothpastes we found zinc oxide and totarol. **Colour** While some natural toothpastes we found had no added colour, others use titanium oxide for white, chlorophyll for green and CI42090, an artificial blue colour. **Sweeteners** Artificial sweeteners include sorbitol (which is also a humectant), glycerol, xylitol (which can help prevent decay), stevia and sodium saccharin.





STORY DAVID OAKENFULL

Simmer down

If you're craving an Asian-style meal, don't expect authenticity from a jar of simmer sauce, finds the CHOICE tasting panel.

NUTSHELL

>> CHOICE tasting panel tried 26 simmer sauces – butter chicken, green curry, satay and sweet and sour. None of them impressed.

>> Few sauces came even close to conjuring up authentic Asian flavours.

When you're pressed for time, what could be simpler than a ready-made sauce? Fry some chicken, stir in a jar of butter chicken or sweet-and-sour sauce, add some vegetables and you have a tasty meal ready to serve within about 20 minutes. It's not surprising these sauces are popular; in fact, Australians are now spending about \$80 million a year on them. But with so many types and flavours on supermarket shelves, there's a bewildering choice. Which taste best? Which are most like a sauce made from scratch using an authentic recipe?

CHOICE focused on four popular Asian flavours that include most of the major brands (26 sauces in total): butter chicken, green curry, satay, and sweet and sour. Unfortunately, none greatly impressed our team of tasters.

Sauces of disappointment

None of the sauces rated much better than OK for taste, and most failed to evoke the cuisine they're supposed to represent (see table, page 24). This is quite damning given the tasters were ordinary consumers, not professional foodies who may have had unrealistic expectations.

These sauces are formulated to have a broad appeal; as one of our tasters commented (about Indian Chicken Tonight Butter Chicken), "a bit bland for Indian, but my kids would eat it". So don't expect a gourmet meal – these sauces don't necessarily contain all authentic ingredients, and are often artificially thickened and coloured.

We also found price is no guide – on average, the more expensive sauces tasted no better, or were any more likely to taste authentic, than cheaper versions. And the more expensive sauces in sachets were no more likely to impress than the cheaper options in jars or cans.

That said, none of the sauces is outrageously expensive and they're definitely convenient, as unopened they'll keep for more than a year without refrigeration. Our tasters found a few worth having in the pantry for when you need to whip up a quick meal (see Tasters' Selection, below).

Butter chicken

Butter chicken originated in Northern India. Recipes vary, but most say the chicken should be marinated in yoghurt and spices before being grilled or roasted; the sauce is made from butter (ghee), tomatoes, almonds and various spices

TASTERS' SELECTION

We focused on four popular Asian flavours – butter chicken, green curry, satay and sweet & sour. Our tasters liked this selection best from each flavour category. Some have too much sugar or sodium for regular eating – check the table, page 24, for details.



Butter chicken

Indian Chicken Tonight \$3.29
Taylor's Kashmiri \$2.99

Green curry

Ayam \$2.83

Satay

Dragon & Phoenix \$2.37
Taylor's \$2.99

Sweet and sour

Kan Tong Sweet & Sour \$2.99

that can include cumin, cloves, cinnamon, coriander, fenugreek and pepper. The tasters preferred Indian Chicken Tonight and Taylor's Kashmiri Butter Chicken over the other brands – but without much enthusiasm. Indian Chicken Tonight was described as “quite nice”, and Taylor's Kashmiri Butter Chicken as “OK, but wrong colour and flavour”.

“Product of India” on the label is no guarantee the sauce really tastes “authentic”. Maharajah's Choice is imported from India but the tasters weren't convinced of its authenticity (although they quite liked the taste). The most convincing was Passage to India, which one taster described as “a reasonable imitation but far from restaurant standard”. (On average, though, the tasters gave higher taste scores to the sauces they judged to be more authentic.)

Green curry

The word “green” in the name comes from the colour of this characteristic Thai dish. According to Charmaine Solomon's *The Complete Asian Cookbook*, the main ingredients should be coconut milk, green curry paste, eggplant, kaffir lime leaves and Thai basil leaves. Green curry paste is made from chillies, shallots, garlic, galangal (a close relative of ginger), turmeric and shrimp paste.

Ayam Thai Green Curry Cooking Sauce stood out as having the best flavour and as the most authentic tasting. Nonetheless, the tasters thought it “bland” and “lacks depth”. Trailing the pack, Taylor's Thai Green Curry was “too sweet” and had “the consistency of mayonnaise”.

Satay

This sauce is widely used in Indonesian and Malay cooking. The main ingredients should be a roasted peanut paste, such as peanut butter, and soy sauce to give it a nutty and salty taste. Recipes often also include coconut milk, shrimp paste, garlic and spices (such as coriander and cumin).

None of the sauces in our test scored well for authenticity. The panel preferred the taste of Dragon & Phoenix and Taylor's Peanut Satay equally but grudgingly, awarding them only 55% each. One of the tasters commented that Dragon & Phoenix “actually tastes of peanuts”, but others found it bland. Taylor's Peanut Satay was “nice and spicy” and “very sweet”. One of the two brands least liked, Kan Tong Peanut Satay, was described as “flavourless” and the other, Woolworths Select Satay Sauce with Extra Peanuts, as “goosey”.

Sweet and sour

The Cantonese probably came up with the idea of merging these two very different taste sensations. The sweet comes from white or brown sugar; the sour should be from either rice wine or rice vinegar. None of the simmer sauce

versions rated well for taste or authenticity. Only one brand, Kan Tong Sweet & Sour, scored more than 50% for taste, and then only marginally. The tasters described this sauce as “a bit bland” and “too simple – just sweetness and sourness”.

Good for you?

Many of these sauces contain more saturated fat and salt than is healthy for regular eating – and most of the sweet and sour sauces are too high in sugar. But if you serve them with vegetables or a salad (as recommended by most manufacturers in the instructions on the label) some of these sauces aren't too bad nutritionally – although if you use them a lot, try to avoid brands with too much fat, sugar and/or salt, which we've shown in the table (page 24) with the amount and a red square alongside. On average, satay sauces are the worst for all three.

There's no real need for some manufacturers to add so much salt to their sauces because we found overall there's no relationship between the taste scores and the amount of sodium per 100g. >

Australians are now spending \$80 million a year on simmer sauces.

HOW WE TEST



Our tester cooks the sauces with chicken following the manufacturer's instructions and serves them with boiled rice. They are tasted by 55 ordinary consumers (29 men and 26 women), all CHOICE staff. The sauces are presented in a random order in plain containers identified only by numbers and letters; the tasters know the type of sauce but not the brand. Each sauce is tasted by nine to 12 people. We ask them to score the taste of the sauces for overall impression as well as how closely they think the samples taste like authentic food from that country's cuisine.

There's
no need
for some
of these
sauces
to have
so much
added salt.

SIMMER SAUCES							
Simmer sauce (ranked by taste score within groups)	Taste score (%)	Authenticity score (%)	Energy (kJ/100g)	Saturated fat (g/100g)	Sugars (g/100g)	Sodium (mg/100g)	Average price per 100g (\$)
BUTTER CHICKEN							
Indian Chicken Tonight Butter Chicken	63	41	472	1.8 ▲	3.5 ●	390 ▲	0.66
Taylor's Kashmiri Butter Chicken	63	45	308	0.3 ●	5.0 ●	900 ■	0.62
Maharajah's Choice Butter Chicken Mild	58	26	648	3.4 ▲	1.4 ●	440 ▲	0.89
Woolworths Select Butter Chicken (A)	56	47	625	1.1 ●	11.6 ▲	1100 ■	1.65
Sharwood's Butter Chicken Mild/Medium	54	31	479	2.6 ▲	4.4 ●	600 ■	0.93
Passage to India Butter Chicken (A)	52	52	786	1.4 ●	7.3 ▲	728 ■	1.12
Simmer Sensations Sauce for Butter Chicken (ALDI)	46	25	449	5.0 ■	3.7 ●	516 ▲	0.46
Patak's Original Butter Chicken Mild New	42	37	501	3.7 ▲	7.6 ▲	380 ▲	1.04
Woolworths Select Butter Chicken 97% Fat Free	38	15	286	0.6 ●	5.0 ●	368 ▲	0.35
GREEN CURRY							
Ayam Thai Green Curry Cooking Sauce (B)	64	52	259	3.1 ▲	4.0 ●	541 ▲	0.71
Valcom Authentic Thai Green Curry (B)	50	44	271	4.3 ▲	2.8 ●	499 ▲	0.79
Kan Tong Inspirations Fragrant Thai Green Curry (A) (C)	45	23	448	5.9 ■	6.9 ▲	373 ▲	0.95
Passage to Thailand Green Thai Curry Simmer Sauce (A)	41	33	1012	11.5 ■	10.2 ▲	811 ■	1.75
Taylor's Thai Green Curry	31	22	338	1.5 ●	11.7 ▲	961 ■	0.60
SATAY							
Dragon & Phoenix Satay Sauce (B)	55	27	758	3.0 ▲	14.0 ▲	700 ■	0.82
Taylor's Peanut Satay	55	30	709	2.3 ▲	16.3 ■	962 ■	0.57
Asia at Home Thai Satay	50	23	856	4.2 ▲	21.4 ■	733 ■	1.33
Eastern Classics Stir Fry Sauce Satay (ALDI)	48	42	914	5.4 ■	9.0 ▲	441 ▲	0.36
Kan Tong Peanut Satay	45	33	512	2.1 ▲	9.3 ▲	409 ▲	0.52
Woolworths Select Satay with Extra Peanuts	45	23	403	1.2 ●	10.4 ▲	633 ■	0.35
SWEET AND SOUR							
Kan Tong Sweet & Sour	52	36	359	0.1 ●	16.9 ■	169 ▲	0.52
Kan Tong Pineapple Sweet & Sour	45	20	410	0.0 ●	19.8 ■	204 ▲	0.57
Home Brand Sweet & Sour	44	42	433	0.1 ●	19.0 ■	233 ▲	0.36
Coles Smart Buy Stir-Fry Sauce Sweet & Sour	43	30	532	<1 ●	27.4 ■	323 ▲	0.36
Kan Tong Sweet & Sour Lite Stir-Fry Sauce	43	27	301	0.0 ●	13.3 ▲	170 ▲	0.57
Woolworths Select 97% Fat Free Sweet & Sour Vegetable	43	20	272	0.0 ●	12.4 ▲	534 ▲	0.35

TABLE NOTES (A) In a sachet, (B) In a can, (C) We followed the instructions on the label and added coconut milk (and factored this into our calculations of the nutritional composition and price per 100g).

USING THE TABLE SCORES These are averages of the tasters' scores for overall impression and authenticity.

Nutrients These are based on information on the label. For ease of comparison we have given the amount of energy per 100g and indicated the levels of saturated fat, sugars and sodium with coloured shapes – red squares for a lot, amber triangles for OK and green circles for a little. The criteria that define the colours are:

Saturated fat (g/100g) ■ 5% or more ▲ 1.6%–4.9% ● 1.5% or less.

Sugars (g/100g) ■ 15% or more ▲ 5.1%–14.9% ● 5% or less.

Sodium: ■ 600mg/100g or more ▲ 121mg–599mg/100g ● 120mg/100g or less.

Price Container sizes vary, so for ease of comparison we have given the price per 100g based on prices we paid in Sydney in May 2009.

STORY SUZIE BROWN

Turning off the sun

As energy prices soar, solar electricity should be a smart investment – but are the incentives strong enough? CHOICE investigates.

NUTSHELL

>> Changes to the federal government's rebate for solar panels are likely to increase the cost of installing a solar PV system.
>> Weak feed-in tariff schemes discourage the uptake of solar panels.

Australia is the sunniest continent on Earth, yet we lag way behind Europe, Asia and North America in solar photovoltaic (PV) panels – a lost opportunity for both jobs and for the environment. While we're recognised as a world leader in solar energy research, in the past decade numerous Australian renewable energy experts have shifted overseas where there is greater funding and more government support for renewable energy development. All too often, our investment in solar research turns into jobs and investment in other countries.

Those in the industry say more supportive government policies are needed to make solar panels a viable investment for most Australian households and

businesses, yet the federal government recently phased out longstanding rebates for solar systems, replacing them with the less generous Solar Credits Scheme.

State governments are currently bringing in feed-in tariffs, which essentially reward customers who purchase solar systems by paying them for any renewable energy they generate and feed into the electricity grid. However, experts contacted by CHOICE believe the model most states are adopting is too limited to have any major effect and falls well short of other countries' more progressive and generous tariffs.

We look at the state of Australia's solar PV industry, the incentives currently available to households and what the government could be doing to encourage future growth. >

HOW THE SOLAR CREDITS SCHEME WORKS

The proposed Solar Credits Scheme (SCS) is based on the existing Renewable Energy Certificates (RECs) market, which already provides money back to those installing solar panels or hot water on top of any rebates. For every tonne of greenhouse emissions saved (over a 15-year period), the owner receives an REC that they can trade on the market at the going rate – currently about \$50 per REC. Australia's electricity companies are required to submit

a certain number of RECs each year to contribute to achieving the national Mandatory Renewable Energy Target. The SCS will merely extend the existing REC scheme, but to provide a large enough incentive the government will multiply by five the number of RECs generated from installing solar PV cells. For example, a one kilowatt (kW) system that would previously have generated about \$1000 in RECs will now be worth \$5000. However, the number of RECs created depends

on where you live, as less sunny climates are deemed to generate lower greenhouse emissions savings. Therefore, those living in Tasmania or Victoria are likely to receive less money back than northern residents. In Melbourne, the subsidy for a 1kW system might be only \$4500. The SCS is capped at \$7500, and the five-times multiplier only applies to systems up to 1.5kW, so people installing larger systems will only receive the value of one REC above this level.

Despite the popularity of rebates and recent industry growth, Australia generates less than 1% of the planet's solar energy.

CASE STUDY

Saving the planet and electricity costs

When Lizette and John Salmon installed a solar system in 2007 on their home in Wodonga, northern Victoria, they were prepared for a large upfront cost to reduce their family's environmental footprint. They live in a spacious family home with their two young children. More than half of their electricity consumption was for powering their pool's filtration pump.

The Salmons installed a top-of-the-range 3kW system worth \$34,000. They received the \$8000 federal rebate plus a further \$1500 from selling the RECs, making their total investment \$24,500. They

calculate they have saved an average \$1000 per year through reduced electricity costs and credits paid to them for the excess green energy they feed into the grid. Currently, their electricity provider credits them at the same rate as they are charged for incoming conventional electricity (this rate will increase under the new Victorian feed-in tariff).

As electricity costs rise, their payback time will reduce. Based on their electricity savings to date, and at an annual increase in electricity prices of 6%, the payback period for their investment would be 30 years; a 10% price rise would reduce this payback period to 19 years.



The Victorian net feed-in tariff, which will kick in later this year, sets the return on excess generation at 60c per kWh and is credited to their account. This will most likely reduce the Salmon's payback period.

Lack of government support

Australians have a long history of putting solar panels on our outback homes and buildings that are too remote to connect to the electricity grid. In recent years, many more grid-connected households and community buildings have installed solar PV cells, thanks to generous federal government rebates. Yet despite the popularity of the rebates and recent growth in the industry, Australia generates less than 1% of the world's solar electricity. This compares poorly to cloudy Germany, the world's largest producer and user of solar PV systems, which has about 49% of the global market, largely due to supportive government policies. The bulk of the rest of the world's solar electricity generation is in Japan, the US, Spain and other parts of Europe.

The rapid growth of solar installations and manufacturing in these countries has been attributed largely to gross feed-in tariffs, where the owner of a solar system is paid for all the renewable energy it generates, including the electricity they use themselves. Industry players in Australia have called on federal and state governments to introduce a similar gross national feed-in tariff. However, state and territory governments, which are responsible for setting electricity prices, have decided to go it alone and are gradually introducing disparate and mostly very limited feed-in schemes.

While the federal government points to its \$500m Renewable Energy Fund – which includes a \$100m solar research institute – and \$150m Energy Innovation

Fund as evidence of its commitment to solar and other green energy, solar industry players do not believe current policy is creating the necessary incentives. Our few large solar farms have all had to rely on one-off government grants. "There's no long-term driver for that market," says Muriel Watt, Chair of the Australian PV Association. Large-scale commercial building installations and solar farms miss out on government support, such as rebates and feed-in tariffs, as these only apply to small-scale solar systems.

BP Solar's recent decision to relocate its Sydney solar cell manufacturing plant to Asia has marked, at least for now, the end of Australia's solar cell manufacturing industry. BP Solar's Australian spokesman, Chandran Vigneswaran, says the decision was prompted by the need to increase efficiency by locating its manufacturing close to the supply of silicon, which is primarily in Asia. It was not due to lack of demand for solar in Australia. He says federal government rebates had driven growth in recent years, but the solar industry is not reaching its potential – BP Solar has a vision of one million Australian solar homes by 2020. "We've been calling for one national gross feed-in tariff," he says. "It's hard for the industry to scale up without investment certainty."

Rising electricity prices

Brad Shone, of Moreland Energy Foundation, says rising electricity prices make solar panels a wise investment. "Our electricity demand is growing and the current

infrastructure is straining to cope," he says. But like others, he sees government policy as providing limited support.

Wodonga solar retailer and chairman of the Solar Energy Industries Association of Australia (Victoria), Gary Davy, believes most Australians do not see the value in investing in solar panels. "People have always had that attitude: how long will it take before it pays for itself? Yet people will go out and buy a \$90,000 car and think nothing of it." Davy believes real government rebates or inducements, such as a generous gross feed-in-tariff, are needed to boost support.

Goodbye rebates, hello credits

Since 2000 the federal government has provided a rebate for solar panels for remote systems (not connected to the grid) and grid-connected homes. Rebates for both have been scrapped and now come under the Solar Credits Scheme (see page 25). For those households earning less than \$100,000, who previously qualified for a rebate of \$8000 if they installed solar panels, the new scenario is less generous and infinitely more complicated.

Those earning more than \$100,000 will now be eligible for a much greater subsidy – but what you get will really depend on where you live. Importantly, unlike the previous rebates, small businesses and non-primary residences such as holiday homes will also be eligible for the new scheme.

The new scheme also has its environmental critics. In a joint statement, the Alternative Technology Association (ATA), Greenpeace and the Moreland Energy Foundation say the scheme allows "phantom"

certificates to be created by multiplying the Renewable Energy Certificates (RECs) by five. These RECs then go towards achieving the national Mandatory Renewable Energy Target, even though four in every five certificates do not represent actual green energy.

"Households investing in solar do so at significant personal cost," says Damien Moysse, Energy Advocate for the ATA. "In return for their sacrifice, the government is effectively cancelling out the greenness of their solar system." Given that most people are motivated by increasing renewable energy in Australia and cutting their own emissions, he believes the new scheme is duping solar investors.

Community bulk-buying schemes

To combat the high cost of solar panels, some communities have set up bulk-buying schemes, whereby a large number of households in one area commit to buying PV systems at a discounted price. Some solar retailers, local councils and community groups have also facilitated schemes using this model.

However, they have been largely dependent on the \$8000 solar rebate which, combined with the selling of RECs, had reduced the price for a bulk-purchased 1kW system to as low as a few hundred dollars (but typically about \$1500-\$3000). Some systems were even offered for free under the old rebate scheme.

The reduced subsidy from the new Solar Credits Scheme is likely to put an end to those ultra-cheap bulk deals, although some companies may still be able to keep prices quite low in the sunnier parts of Australia. ■

The reduced subsidy from the new Solar Credits Scheme could spell the end of ultra-cheap bulk deals for solar PV systems.

STATE BY STATE FEED-IN TARIFFS

Most states have introduced or are considering plans for feed-in tariffs, which set the rate at which householders must be paid for solar electricity generated in systems connected to the grid.

Feed-in tariffs help those who invest in solar panels to calculate their returns and payback period. They also ensure better returns, since the tariff is significantly higher than what electricity companies currently choose to credit their customers because it is funded through a small levy on everyone's

electricity bills. However, Muriel Watt, Chair of the Australian PV Association, believes only the ACT has introduced a truly effective gross feed-in tariff where customers are paid for all electricity produced by the panels, even what they use themselves.

In contrast, SA, Queensland, NSW and Victoria have introduced a net feed-in tariff, which means PV owners are paid only for the excess electricity they send to the grid, which for most households is very little. The ACT is also the only

state or territory to apply the feed-in tariff to larger systems as well as small ones, thereby attracting large commercial installations and solar farms to the state.

Although the solar industry has argued strongly for a national gross feed-in tariff, state governments have shown little interest in collaborating on a national scheme and are instead going their own ways.

To view the feed-in tariffs state by state, see www.choice.com.au/tariffs.

CHOICE Online

For information on buying solar PV panels, see www.choice.com.au/pvpanels



STORY UTA MIHM

Cover all bases

CHOICE analysed more than 750 hospital insurance policies to find Best Buys that can save you and your family up to \$675 per year.

NUTSHELL

>> On average, 42% of private patients paid out-of-pocket costs of more than \$1000 in 2007.
>> Extras and combined policies will be covered in the next edition of CHOICE.

With more changes to health insurance rebates in the pipeline, it will be even harder to assess which cover gives you best value for money. CHOICE's

Best Buys for hospital insurance are for five levels of cover which can save your family annually up to:

- \$673 for full-cover policies with no excess
- \$464 for full-cover policies with up to \$500pa excess
- \$638 for full-cover policies with up to \$1000pa excess
- \$184 for restricted-cover policies with up to \$1000 annual excess.

In the Best Buys table, page 31, we've also selected the minimum cover option in your state to avoid Lifetime Health Cover and Medicare Levy surcharges.

Two in five private patients were hit with extra charges in 2007, known as a gap. For more on how to avoid or reduce these, see Mind the Gap, page 30.

Tax changes and you

Health insurance premiums went up by 6% on average this year, with the actual premium increase depending on your fund, state and policy.

Last year, income levels for the extra 1% Medicare Levy Surcharge were increased. Current (indexed) thresholds are \$73,000 for singles and \$146,000 for couples/families. This penalty (on top of the 1.5% Medicare Levy most people pay) can be avoided by taking out hospital insurance – extras (ancillary) insurance is not required.

The recent federal budget flagged changes that increase the penalty from 1% to 1.5%, depending on your income level. At the same time, the 30% rebate (35% for those aged 65-69 and 40% if you're aged 70 and older) that currently applies to all hospital and extras premiums will be cut back depending on your income, phasing out entirely for people above a certain income.

DID YOU KNOW

What are restricted funds?

This year we've also looked at two types of restricted membership funds in our analysis: Navy Health and Defence Health, which offer policies for members (and their families) of the Australian Defence Force and Department of Defence; and Teachers Union Health and Teachers Federation Health, which offer policies to education union members and their families. We haven't included them in our Best Buys but we found their policies score well against policies from open membership funds and can save you hundreds of dollars per year, especially for full cover policies; if you're eligible for them, check out their policies at www.choice.com.au/money (click on "Compare health insurance policies").

These changes still need to pass the Senate and will only apply from 1 July 2010, so for the moment there is no need to make any changes.

Our calculations show that even with a reduced rebate, taking out basic hospital insurance is usually a cheaper option if your annual income is above \$75,000 (single) or \$150,000 (family). If it's below this, check carefully whether it is value for money for you.

If you're over 30, you need to factor into your budget the Lifetime Health Cover Surcharge. Depending on how old you are when you join, it ranges from 2% up to a maximum of 70%, increasing on 1 July each year. So if you join at 45 you pay 30% more than someone who joined at 30. After paying the surcharge for 10 years your premium reverts to that paid by people who joined before 1 July after their 31st birthday.

HEALTH FUND GAP COVER FOR PRIVATE PATIENTS

FUND / GAP SCHEME	Doctors' services without a gap (%)*						
	NSW & ACT	VIC	QLD	WA	SA	TAS	NT
HBA & Mutual Community	71	90	74	62	94	79	79
GMHBA	65	77	67	59	77	58	67
HBF	62	68	60	79	81	77	72
HCF	85	91	88	79	98	89	84
Latrobe	76	81	61	57	63	77	77
MBF	83	86	87	67	94	90	79
Medibank Private	83	89	85	70	94	89	75
NIB	78	75	68	56	74	79	71
Access Gap Scheme (A) AHM, Australian Unity, Defence Health, Health Partners, Navy Health, Peoplecare, Teachers Federation Health, Teacher's Union Health	84	88	84	65	94	83	83
Total / industry outcome	82	88	85	74	88	88	77

FUND / GAP SCHEME	Doctors' services with a known gap (%)**						
	NSW & ACT	VIC	QLD	WA	SA	TAS	NT
HBA & Mutual Community	2	3	3	5	2	4	4
GMHBA	7	14	6	7	8	20	24
HBF	36	28	37	14	17	21	22
HCF (B)	—	—	—	—	—	—	—
Latrobe	22	16	30	37	34	21	20
MBF (B)	—	—	—	—	—	—	—
Medibank Private	4	5	6	11	4	7	10
NIB (B)	—	—	—	—	—	—	—
Access Gap Scheme (A) AHM, Australian Unity, Defence Health, Health Partners, Navy Health, Peoplecare, Teachers Federation Health, Teacher's Union Health	4	5	7	13	2	7	7
Total / industry outcome	2	5	3	13	9	4	6

TABLE NOTES All figures are rounded. *A gap is where a doctor charges you more than the benefit you receive from your fund and Medicare. **This is where you have out-of-pocket costs but the doctor informs you of them beforehand and participates in your fund's known gap scheme so your fund pays you a larger benefit. (A) This scheme is operated by the Australian Health Services Alliance (AHSa) for its member funds. We have only named the funds participating in our survey. (B) These funds don't offer a known gap arrangement to doctors. **Source:** Private Health Insurance Ombudsman State of the Health Funds Report 2008.

If your doctor or hospital does not participate in your fund's gap scheme, you can switch to a fund that does – even just before treatment.

Hospital insurance savings

You can save on hospital insurance by taking out a policy with an excess/co-payment, whereby you cover part of the cost of your treatments yourself, such as \$500 per stay in hospital. For the cheapest full cover policies, see Full Cover, Up To \$500 Excess and Full Cover, Up To \$1000 Excess in the table (page 31).

Restricted policies provide lower coverage for some procedures; commonly restricted ones include hip replacements, cataract surgery and obstetrics. These policies also allow you to choose your own doctor but don't cover you for treatment in a private hospital, which means you can't avoid public hospital waiting lists; see policies listed under Restricted Cover, Up To \$1000 Excess in the table. If you only want hospital cover in order to avoid surcharges

and penalties, consider the policies listed under Cheapest Policy to avoid Lifetime Health Cover Surcharge in the table.

Out-of pocket fees reduce benefits

If you receive treatment as a private patient, your private hospital insurance will not always cover the full cost. According to a survey conducted by Ipsos for the Department of Health and Ageing, 42% of private patients in 2007 had to pay a gap – the difference between the hospital and/or doctor's bill after you receive your Medicare and health fund benefits. This is on top of any excess and co-payment you agree to pay when taking out your policy. The average gap was \$1011 for overnight patients in a private hospital and \$557 for overnight patients receiving treatment as a private >

CHOICE Online

The Best Buys published here are only a selection of the 763 family policies we analysed. The full range of policies, including those for singles, couples and single parents will soon be available at www.choice.com.au/money. Click on "Compare health insurance policies" to use our interactive tool.

patient in a public hospital. These charges vary state by state, with the highest average gaps occurring in NSW.

Gaps can apply to hospital bills but are mainly charged on doctor's fees, such as those for specialists. There may also be a number of doctors involved in your treatment; the Ipsos survey found close to 70% of hospital patients were treated by an anaesthetist, of which about a third had to pay a gap charge for this treatment. The average out-of-pocket expense was \$320 for the anaesthetist alone.

Many hospitals have agreements with private health insurers under which you are not charged a gap for hospital fees. Health insurers also have arrangements with doctors under which the doctor does not charge you a gap, or you may pay a "known gap" amount. The doctor is free to decide on a case-by-case basis if they will treat you under these arrangements. Gap cover arrangements vary from fund to fund (see the table, page 29). Your hospital or doctor may not have an arrangement with your fund, in which case you may be able to save money by switching to a fund that does. You can do this even a short time before treatment, such as surgery, without having to serve a waiting period, so long as you switch to the same level of cover (such as full cover with no excess) with the new fund.

Mind the gap

There are ways to minimise your out-of-pocket costs if you're expecting to go to a hospital in the near future.

Review your policy Make sure it is still suitable for your circumstances. Talk to your fund if you're not sure you're covered for any treatments you may need.

Review your excess and co-payments Consider upgrading to a policy without an excess. However, keep in mind the 12-month waiting period for pre-existing conditions that applies if you upgrade to a higher level of cover, even if you stay with the same fund.

USING THE BEST BUYS TABLE

Premiums are monthly family premiums rounded to the nearest dollar with the 30% government rebate deducted. Some funds may give you a discount if you pay via direct debit and/or annually instead of monthly.

Single premiums usually cost half the family premium, while couples pay the same as a family. Some funds give single parents a large discount on the family premium.

Full cover policies cover you in a public or private hospital as a private patient, allowing you to jump public hospital waiting lists.

Restricted cover policies don't cover all procedures in a private hospital. For some procedures you'll only be covered as a private patient in a public hospital (usually in a shared room), which allows you to choose your doctor but not jump public hospital waiting lists.

Cheapest policies let you avoid the Lifetime Health Cover Surcharge and most provide an exemption from the Medicare Levy Surcharge. They may have restrictions and exclusions, and usually have a high excess.

Excess and co-payment

Usually the higher the excess or co-payment, the cheaper the premium. An excess means you pay a certain amount towards the cost of your treatment, usually once per hospital stay. With a co-payment you pay an amount for a certain number of days each hospital stay, such as \$50 per day. We've only included policies that have an annual cap for excess and/or co-payment.

Scores

We rated policies on their level of cover for 10 commonly restricted services: major heart surgery; cataract eye surgery; obstetrics (pregnancy and birth-related services);

assisted reproductive services (IVF); hip and knee replacements; dialysis for chronic renal failure; plastic surgery for medical reasons; rehabilitation; psychiatric services and palliative care. We also included a rating for the percentage of medical services with a gap. This figure is different in each state, which is why a policy may have different scores in different states and hence why some scores are a range rather than an absolute figure. On average, the highest percentage of medical services with a gap occur in NT, the lowest in Tasmania. For more information, see the table on page 29.

TABLE NOTES

(A) Not applicable.

(A) Cataract surgery, obstetrics, IVF, hip and knee replacement, dialysis and psychiatric only covered as a private patient in a public hospital.

(B) Major heart surgery, cataract eye surgery, obstetrics, IVF, hip and knee replacements, rehabilitation and psychiatric only covered as a private patient in a public hospital.

(C) Major heart surgery, cataract surgery, obstetrics, IVF, hip and knee replacements, plastic surgery for medical reasons, rehabilitation and psychiatric only covered as a private patient in a public hospital.

(D) As this policy has an excess of more than \$1000 it does not exempt you from paying the Medicare Levy Surcharge.

(E) All treatments covered only as a private patient in a public hospital.

(F) Major heart surgery, cataract surgery, obstetrics, IVF, hip and knee replacements and dialysis not covered. As this policy has an excess of more than \$1000 it does not exempt you from paying the Medicare Levy Surcharge.

CONTACTS

GENERAL FUNDS

AHM, 13 42 46
Australian Unity, 13 29 39
GMHBA, 1300 446 422
HBA, 13 12 43
HBF, 13 34 23
HCF, 13 13 34
Health Partners, 1300 113 113
Latrobe, 1300 362 155
MBF, 131 137
Medibank Private, 132 331
Mutual Community, 131 243
NIB, 13 14 63
Peoplecare, 1800 808 690

RESTRICTED MEMBERSHIP FUNDS

Defence Health, 1800 335 425
Navy Health, 1300 306 289
Teachers Federation Health, 1300 728 188
Teachers Union Health, 1300 360 701

Doctor's gap cover arrangements Ask your doctor if he/she has gap cover arrangements with your fund and if you will have to pay any out-of-pocket costs. Get this information in writing.

Other services Ask your doctor if you will be billed by other doctors who may treat you, such as an anaesthetist or surgeon's assistant, and how you can get an estimate of their fees.

Hospital gap agreement Ask the hospital if it has a current agreement with your fund and if there will be any out-of-pocket costs.

Confirm any information you get from the hospital and doctor with your fund. ■

BEST BUYS		MONTHLY FAMILY PREMIUM IN STATE(S) WHERE POLICY IS A BEST BUY (\$)								
Fund / policy (in order of score within categories)	Score (%)	ACT/NSW	NT	Queensland	SA	Tasmania	Victoria	WA	Annual excess (\$)	All services covered in private hospital
FULL COVER, NO EXCESS										
HCF Top Plus	93-99				199	204	207	184	na	✓
Peoplecare Private Hospital	95-98	200		200	200	200	200		na	✓
Health Partners Gold Hospital	95-96			209			209		na	✓
AHM Top Hospital	95		130						na	✓
Latrobe H3: Top Hospital Cover	94-95					204	204		na	✓
Medibank Private Blue Ribbon Hospital Cover	91-95	190	122	211				177	na	✓
HBF Top Hospital	94							199	na	✓
FULL COVER, UP TO \$500 EXCESS										
Peoplecare Private Hospital (\$250 excess)	95-98	174		174	174	174	174		500	✓
Medibank Private Blue Ribbon Hospital Cover Level 2	91-98	163	87	173	172			142	500	✓
Latrobe X2: Top Hospital CoverWise	94-95	173				173	173		500	✓
HBF Intermediate Hospital (\$140/\$280 excess)	94							146	280	✓
GMHBA Gold Hospital Level 1	93						170		500	✓
MBF Advantage Hospital (\$250 excess)	93-94	174	98						500	✓
FULL COVER, UP TO \$1000 EXCESS										
HCF Top Plus \$450 Excess	93-99		✓		154			135	900	✓
Australian Unity Comprehensive Hospital (J4)	98				157				1000	✓
Peoplecare Private Hospital (\$500 excess)	95-98	147		147	147		147		1000	✓
Medibank Private Blue Ribbon Hospital Cover Level 3	91-98	146	74	156	158			129	1000	✓
Latrobe X3: Top Hospital CoverWise	94-95	135				135	135		1000	✓
MBF Advantage Hospital (\$500 excess)	93		80						1000	✓
RESTRICTED COVER, UP TO \$1000 EXCESS										
HCF Hospital Advanced Savings \$450 Excess	63-69	93	60	108	105	90	112	70	900	(A)
HBA / Mutual Community Hospital Saver	54-61			107	107	94	112		1000	(B)
Medibank Private First Choice Hospital Cover Level 3	52-58	87	63	108	107				1000	(C)
CHEAPEST POLICY TO AVOID LIFETIME HEALTH COVER SURCHARGE										
MBF Advantage Hospital (\$1000 excess)	93		50						2000	✓ (D)
MBF Public Hospital	36-44		49			79		49	0	(E)
GMHBA Bronze Hospital Level 2	35-41	68		73	75	75	75		1000	(E)
NIB Public Hospital (\$400 excess)	40					75			800	(E)
MBF Budget Hospital with Exclusions (\$1000 excess)	29-34	61	30					46	2000	(F)



STORY TANYA FONG

Balancing the bill

When you need to see a solicitor, how do you know if you're being overcharged – and what can you do about it? CHOICE investigates.

NUTSHELL

>> You can avoid being overcharged for legal consultations, provided you know your rights.
>> If you think you have been overcharged, there are steps you can take before making a formal complaint.

When it comes to legal fees, consumers are getting a raw deal. In the year to June 2008, Victoria's Legal Services Commissioner received 827 complaints of overcharging, while in South Australia almost 40% of cases at the state's Legal Practitioners Conduct Board related to overbilling. In the same period, complaints about legal costs comprised nearly a quarter of all written complaints received by the NSW Office of the Legal Services Commissioner (OLSC). In one case, a solicitor charged \$750 for typing a three-page document and \$40 for receiving a message to return a phone call.

CHOICE outlines what you can do to minimise the risk of being overcharged and the steps to take if you suspect you've been ripped off.

Preventative action

Beware the "free" visit Several law firms offer free first sessions, but this may only cover the first hour of your consultation – so make sure you find out the exact duration of the "free" visit. You should also check if you'll be charged for any legal advice given. Most solicitors do not give written advice during the first free visit and may charge you a fee to do so as they can be sued for giving the wrong opinion based on a one-hour consultation.

Professional first, friend second Never assume you'll be able to bag a bargain with a solicitor you know personally or who is recommended to you. Last year, CHOICE subscriber Russell engaged a solicitor acquaintance to handle his mother's estate. Three months later, he received a bill for almost \$8000, with a costs disclosure document he claims he'd never seen before nor been told about. He complained to the NSW OLSC, which is looking into the matter. Whoever you choose as your solicitor, formalise the arrangement before proceeding.

Know your rights Getting things right at the beginning will save you time and money. "Consumers should be more proactive when engaging solicitors because they are the ones paying, and solicitors are merely agents with legal knowledge who advise and act on the client's instructions," says former NSW Supreme Court costs assessor Paul Garde, a solicitor with 30 years' industry experience.

Most importantly, the consumer should establish whether their claim is worth defending. "Solicitors should tell their clients, either at the outset or as the case progresses, whether the case is winnable,

CONTACTS

- **AUSTRALIA-WIDE** Community Legal Centres (CLCs) are independent, non-profit organisations that provide free legal services to the public. To find a CLC in your state, go to www.naclc.org.au
- **ACT** Law Society, www.lawsocact.asn.au
- **NSW** Office of the Legal Services Commissioner, www.lawlink.nsw.gov.au/olsc
- **NT** Law Society Northern Territory, www.lawsocietynt.asn.au
- **Queensland** Legal Services Commission, www.lsc.qld.gov.au
- **SA** Legal Practitioners Conduct Board, www.legalcomplaints.com.au
- **Tasmania** Law Society of Tasmania, www.taslawsociety.asn.au
- **Victoria** Victorian Civil and Administrative Tribunal, www.vcat.vic.gov.au
- **Legal Services Commissioner**, www.lsc.vic.gov.au
- **WA** Legal Practice Board of WA, www.lpbwa.org.au

DIFFERENT STATES, DIFFERENT RULES

Legal billing grievances are dealt with differently in each state. There are 55 bodies that regulate the legal profession across all the state jurisdictions, however, there are moves to reform the system to bring it under a national regulator. The reforms include uniform rules on solicitors' trust accounts and costs disclosure, fines for any breaches of provisions adopted and a new regulation under which the principals of law firms – not their solicitors or any other person – would approve bills. The new legislation is expected to be drafted before May 2010. In the meantime, the following procedures apply in NSW, SA and Victoria.

In NSW, when consumers make a complaint to the Office of the Legal Services Commissioner, they are recommended for mediation or referred to the NSW Supreme Court for a costs assessor to review and decide upon a fair and reasonable amount of costs for the services provided. There is an application fee of either \$100 or 1% of the amount of costs remaining unpaid or in dispute at the time of making the application, whichever is the greater.

In SA, the Legal Practitioners Conduct Board investigates complaints at no cost to the complainant and has the power to refer gross overcharging to the SA Supreme Court and take

disciplinary action against the solicitor. Last financial year, nearly half the advisory letters it sent legal practitioners related to solicitors' conduct on costs to their clients.

In Victoria, no application fees are involved but complainants must deposit the amount of disputed and unpaid legal fees into an interest-bearing bank account held by the Legal Services Commissioner before it will deal with the complaint. The deposit may be reduced or waived if it causes undue hardship.

For more information about the complaint process and the fees in your state, see **Contacts**, opposite.

You have the right to ask a solicitor for a costs agreement and the itemised bill you later receive should reflect that agreement.

risky or a maybe," says Garde. The solicitor's job is to explain this in simple terms.

Consumers often don't know it is their right to ask a solicitor at the outset for a costs agreement – a document summarising and itemising the solicitor's work. When you later receive an itemised bill, it should reflect the costs to which you've agreed. You also have the right to be notified of any changes in your case, such as court developments, and how they will affect costs. Under most states' Legal Profession Acts, before being retained by the client solicitors are legally obliged to disclose costs such as their hourly rate and the cost of expenses such as photocopying documents. Not doing so can amount to professional misconduct, and several solicitors have been taken to task by relevant state legal bodies.

Garde says consumers' lack of awareness of their rights resulted in a substantial number of the overcharging cases he saw as a costs assessor. "What's most astonishing is that a surprising number of solicitors still do not do any costs disclosure whatsoever, even though they are legally obliged to do so." This information gap, coupled with the fact that most clients are generally in a state of distress when a solicitor is needed, may explain why some poor disclosure practices persist.

Questions to ask

What is the basis of legal costs and expenses?

Different jurisdictions across Australia have different methods of calculating costs. The most common scenario is that the consumer pays all legal fees and

expenses regardless of the outcome. But under a conditional costs agreement (no win, no fees), you pay only if your case is successful. Be sure to ask what a "successful outcome" means in such an agreement, how much you may have pay in fees from your award when you win, and how much in legal expenses, such as photocopying bills, you may also have to pay.

Will the costs be time- or scale-based?

Time-based costs are charged on an hourly rate, while scale-based costing relies on each state court's scale – a standard list of charges for various legal expenses and tasks performed by a solicitor. In NSW, for example, probate (deceased estate) and family law matters are based on a scale of costs set out by the courts.

How and when will you be billed?

You can ask for a bill itemising how often you will be charged, any interest that may be charged on overdue bills and whether this rate is fixed or variable.

What are the estimated total legal costs and expenses?

You can ask for an explanation of the possible major events that may escalate costs, such as a counterclaim by the other party or new evidence.

Who else will be involved in your case?

Fees may multiply as more legal professionals become involved, such as additional junior or senior solicitors or barristers. However, if your case looks like it might end up in court, it may be worthwhile consulting a barrister as soon as possible through your solicitor. >

Victorian barrister Maryanne Loughnan, SC, says that because barristers are constantly in court they are able to advise clients on the likely outcomes should a dispute go to court. Along with the solicitor, they can also provide an estimate of the costs of a full court case.

Ask if your case is to be handled solely by your solicitor and, if not, how much you'll be charged if a barrister is engaged. This will enable you to decide whether or not you wish to get involved in a court case.

Challenging your bill

If you believe you've been overcharged by your solicitor or law firm, first check that you have a costs agreement and itemised bill. These documents will help you work out which items are in dispute. In Victoria, NSW and Queensland, solicitors are legally obliged to give you an itemised bill within 28 days of being asked.

Talk to your solicitor This could be the most cost-effective solution when you think you have been overcharged – but be aware of your rights.

CHOICE subscriber Anastasia, who was upset with her solicitors for failing to prepare a response to the court on a child custody dispute with her ex-husband, wanted to terminate her relationship with the law firm. She asked for her bill, which came to a lump sum of \$2500. "I then asked for an itemised bill so I could understand the high cost," she says. "Instead, I received a letter from the firm offering an \$800 discount only if I did not request an itemised bill." Disillusioned, she paid the \$1700 and represented herself in court.

Costs mediation Mediation is generally quicker and cheaper than costs assessment in court. In most states, legal bodies (see Contacts, page 32) provide free mediation where you and the solicitor come together with an independent mediator. Most mediators cannot give legal advice or decide whether the costs are fair or reasonable, but being independent facilitators, they may be able to help both parties come to an agreement.

Make a formal complaint Every state has a body that handles consumer complaints about legal services and solicitors (see Contacts, page 32). Generally, the cost dispute will be looked into and may be referred to another legal body, where a disciplinary inquiry against the solicitor may be initiated. There is also a time limit – usually between 30 and 60 days – to make a complaint. The processes and costs for seeking redress vary with each jurisdiction (see Different States, Different Rules, page 33). ■

CASE STUDIES

Legal grumbles

"My ex-husband and I drew up a simple agreement in relation to the division of our assets that should only have cost \$600, but ended up costing me \$1800. My solicitor insisted she needed extra information to draw up the agreement. In the end, she drew up one that looked exactly like the one I gave her, yet the costs trebled from all the emailing and telephoning for which she happily charged me.

When I confronted her, she said she would not give me the document until I paid the full amount. I had to pay in the end as I needed this legal agreement to avoid paying stamp duty on the house." **Lara, NSW**

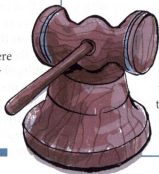
"In 2006, my neighbour made a claim against me for negligence in not repairing a faulty fence in a timely manner. He had scaffolding put up and made a \$54,000 claim against me – \$14,000 for the cost of the scaffolding and professional expenses and \$40,000 for his estimated legal fees.

As part of my defence, my solicitors advised me to cross-claim against my builder who was to blame for not repairing the fence when instructed. They estimated that the legal cost of defending the case would be between \$20,000 and \$40,000, most of which could be passed on to my builder if I was successful in establishing the cross claim.

After the first hearing, my legal costs more than trebled to about \$150,000. My solicitors said this was partly because of the delaying tactics of my neighbour. As I no longer trusted their advice and felt I had been overcharged, I dismissed them and had their costs assessed. As a result, \$15,000 was discounted from the bill, most of which I've settled.

I have now appointed new solicitors and have spent between \$30,000 and \$40,000 fighting two cases – one against the neighbour's claim and the other against my previous solicitors."

Michael, NSW



On test

Home entertainment, whitegoods, household and personal appliances – they're all tested here.

BENCHTOP MIXERS
PAGE 48



Inside

36 Media players



40 Washing machines



Plus

45 Chest freezers

52 Landline phones

56 Zoom lenses

60 Hair dryers

Latest testing

> Camcorders We've added 14 models to our camcorder test. Check out the results at www.choice.com.au/camcorders

For more product tests go to www.choice.com.au

CHOICE has its own testing laboratories, where experienced technical staff put products through their paces. We use test methods from Australian standards, and we develop our own to match the way consumers use a product in real life. We buy the products we test, to maintain our independence from manufacturers and so we know what you're faced with in the shops. Our recommendations are based on a product's quality and performance, with no hidden bias.

CHOICE SHOPPER For the best deal on products where you see this logo, call 1300 360 655. Have the model name and number, the price you've been quoted and your CHOICE personal subscriber number.

BEST BUY

CHOICE BEST BUY A product is a Best Buy if it delivers high quality at a comparatively low price. Not every test report has Best Buys.

GREEN BUY

CHOICE GREEN BUY A Green Buy delivers both good quality and environmental performance at a comparatively low price. Not every test report has Green Buys.



CHOICE VIDEO When you see the CHOICE Video icon, there is more information about that story at www.choice.com.au.



STORY DENIS GALLAGHER

Mixed-up media

Getting a video file to play on these portable media players can be challenging.

NUTSHELL

>>The minefield of non-standard video and unsupported file formats can make importing videos very frustrating.

>>While most of the models support Microsoft's Windows Media Player application, ironically Microsoft's own media players do not.

Digital music or MP3/MP4 players have evolved over the past decade to the point where the latest models provide an intuitive interface and a simple, effective way to get music from a computer into your pocket. However, as CHOICE's latest test confirms, video continues to be an issue even with so-called "standard" video files.

We tested 12 players with a range of screen sizes and memory capacities. Of the models on test, three store their media on a hard drive. The others are flash memory devices, using either removable cards or internal storage, supporting memory sizes from 4GB to 32GB. We also looked at the Sony PSP Slim & Lite, a handheld games console that plays music and video.

We included two Microsoft Zune models in our test, even though Microsoft requested we not publish our results. However, while they are not officially available from Microsoft Australia, so you may not get good local support, you can readily buy them from online stores – and they're shipped from local addresses.

Codec confusion

With varying degrees of success, all models on test can play music and video and show photos. Digital video and audio is compressed using different codecs (short for coder-decoder). Most codecs, such as the MP3 audio format, are designed to create a file size that is as small as possible while keeping most of the inherent audio or video quality intact. Unfortunately, different companies have different priorities on what they want in a media file, with the result that media players now must cope with several audio and video formats.

Most of the models on test have difficulties playing certain video formats, with some models even unable to play a file they claim to support. The problem is that even though files may appear to have the correct file type, as indicated by its name (*.mov, *.mp4, *.mp3

and so on), the actual codec used to create it may be different from the common standard.

Playing movies can be even more problematic than audio as a movie file contains video and audio content, both bundled together into a single file. This type of file is called a "container", generally shown with a name ending in *.avi, *.mov, *.wmv or similar. However, just to confuse things, containers can often support a variety of codecs; for example, it's possible to have an *.avi file that contains video compressed with MPEG or XVID and audio as a *.wav file. Therefore, while some media players may say they support a wide variety of video file formats, they may not cope with the different types of files contained within a video file.

If you find a file won't play on your application or media player, you may be able to convert the file to a suitable format using a free transcoding program such as MediaCoder (www.mediacoder.sourceforge.net). >

HOW WE TEST

Ease of use Our CHOICE testers check how easy the players are to set up, play music and video, transfer music and video files with the software provided or Windows Media Player (or iTunes with Apple products). They also evaluate how easy each player is to handle, carry around or wear.

Sound quality They listen to each player and measure frequency response signal to noise ratio, total harmonic distortion and channel separation.

Video quality They watch the video and assess it for colour, clarity and accuracy of rendition.

Battery life To check how long the battery on each model lasts while playing video, our testers play the same video tracks on each model at the same volume on repeat-play mode until they switch off. Audio tracks were used in previous tests, so battery life scores are not comparable across tests.

WHAT TO BUY

81% Archos Internet Media Tablet 5

PRICE \$699

CAPACITY 60GB

GOOD POINTS

- Largest screen in test.
- Scored highest in video quality assessment.
- Very good sound rating.
- Accurate colour gradient with sharp detail.
- Wi-Fi connectivity (802.11b/g).

BAD POINTS

- Heaviest unit on test.
- No conversion software supplied.
- Have to register and download H.264 plug-in.

**78%** Apple iPod Classic

PRICE \$339

CAPACITY 120GB

GOOD POINTS

- Very good sound rating.
- Good colour gradient with sharp detail when watching video.
- Equal-largest storage capacity.

BAD POINTS

- Content can only be transferred with iTunes.

**78%** Sony PSP Slim & Lite 3002

PRICE \$300

CAPACITY Memory stick duo

GOOD POINTS

- Full support for Windows Media Player.
- UMD for playing video and games.
- Very good video rating.
- Large screen.
- Can also play games.
- Wi-Fi connectivity (802.11b only)

BAD POINTS

- Earphones and USB cable not supplied.
- Only model on test without onboard memory.
- Memory Stick Duo (M2) not supplied.

**77%** Apple iPod nano

PRICE \$199

CAPACITY 8GB

GOOD POINTS

- Very light and thin.
- Very good sound rating.
- Sharp video appearance.

BAD POINTS

- Content can only be transferred with iTunes.
- Screen may be too small for video for some users.

**76%** Apple iPod touch

PRICE \$549

CAPACITY 32GB

GOOD POINTS

- Large screen.
- Touch screen easy to use.
- Wi-Fi connectivity (802.11b/g).
- Very good sound rating.
- Volume control buttons.

BAD POINTS

- Content can only be transferred with iTunes.
- Can't be used as a mass storage device.

**75%** Microsoft Zune 8

PRICE \$270

CAPACITY 8GB

GOOD POINTS

- Very good video and sound rating.
- Wi-Fi connectivity (802.11b/g).
- One step video conversion and transfer.

BAD POINTS

- Can't be used as a mass storage device.
- Content can only be transferred with Zune software.
- Screen may be too small for video for some users.
- Worst battery life score of models on test.

**75%** Microsoft Zune 120

PRICE \$440

CAPACITY 120GB

GOOD POINTS

- Moderately large screen.
- Equal-largest storage capacity.
- Very good video and sound rating.
- Wi-Fi connectivity (802.11b/g).
- One step video conversion and transfer.

BAD POINTS

- Can't be used as a mass storage device.
- Content can only be transferred with Zune software, which will not convert AVI or MOV files.

**74%** Creative Zen X-Fi WiFi

PRICE \$400

CAPACITY 32GB

GOOD POINTS

- One step video conversion and transfer.
- SD memory card slot.
- Wi-Fi connectivity (802.11b/g).
- Full support for Windows Media Player.

BAD POINTS

- Screen not as large as some of the top-performing models.



ABOUT THE REST

The **Cowon** has the ability to expand storage by using removable SD cards, however its video quality is not as good as the recommended models.

The **Creative Zen Mosaic** returned one of the worst video performance scores but has excellent battery life.

The **iRiver P7** and **E50** performed well as music players but have poor video quality overall – the E50 particularly so, with significant artefacts or blocky looking video and visible signs of compression on our test video.

PRODUCT	FILE TYPES		
Brand / model	File types supported – audio	File types supported – video codec	Compatible third-party music and video library software
Archos Internet Media Tablet 5	MP3 CBR, MP3 VBR, WMA pro 5.1, WAV, AAC, FLAC, OGG	M-JPEG, MPEG-4, WMV	Windows Media Player
Apple iPod Classic	AAC (16kb/s-320kb/s), Protected AAC, MP3 (16kb/s-320kb/s), MP3 VBR, Audible (formats 2, 3 & 4), Apple Lossless, WAV and AIFF	H.264, MPEG-4 (B)	
Sony PSP Slim & Lite 3002	AAC, ATRAC, MP3, WMA	H.264, MPEG-4 (B)	
Apple iPod nano	AAC (16kb/s-320kb/s), Protected AAC, MP3 (16kb/s-320kb/s), MP3 VBR, Audible (formats 2, 3 & 4), Apple Lossless, WAV and AIFF	H.264, MPEG-4 (C)	
Apple iPod touch	AAC (16kb/s-320kb/s), Protected AAC, MP3 (16kb/s-320kb/s), MP3 VBR, Audible (formats 2, 3 & 4), Apple Lossless, WAV and AIFF	H.264, MPEG-4 (C)	
Microsoft Zune 8	AAC, MP3, WMA	H264, MPEG-2/4, (C)	
Microsoft Zune 120	AAC, MP3, WMA	H264, MPEG-2/4, (C)	
Creative Zen X-Fi WiFi	AAC, AA4, MP3, WAV, WMA	DivX 4/5, M-JPEG, MPEG-4, WMV, and XviD	Windows Media Player
Cowon D2+	APE, FLAC, MP3, OGG, WAV, WMA	Xvid, WMV	Windows Media Player (B)
Creative Zen Mozaic (A)	AA4, MP3, WAV, WMA	Proprietary	Windows Media Player (B)
iriver P7	AC-3, APE, ASF, FLAC, MP3, OGG, WAV, WMA	DivX 5, H264, MPEG-1/2/4, RM/RMVB, WMV	Windows Media Player
iriver E50	APE, FLAC, MP3, WAV, WMA	M-JPEG (C)	Windows Media Player (D)

PRODUCT	PERFORMANCE						FEATURES							
Brand / model (in rank order)	Overall score	Ease of use score (%)	Sound quality score (%)	Video quality score (%)	Battery life score (%)	Battery life (hrsmins)*	Playback while recharging using USB	Can be used as a mass storage device	FM radio	External speaker	Microphone	Wireless connectivity WiFi (802.11b/g)	Fully Mac compatible	Software supplied
Archos Internet Media Tablet 5	81	73	82	90	78	5:30	✓	✓		✓		b / g	✓	Free download
Apple iPod Classic	78	73	82	73	87	6:45	✓	✓					✓	iTunes 8.1 (via download)
Sony PSP Slim & Lite 3002	78	71	78	85	78	5:30	✓	✓		✓	✓	b	✓	Media Manager for PSP 3.0, Media Go 1.1
Apple iPod nano	77	77	83	75	72	4:45	✓	✓					✓	iTunes 8.1
Apple iPod touch	76	72	82	75	78	5:30	✓					b / g	✓	iTunes 8.1
Microsoft Zune 8	75	77	80	80	57	3:30	✓		✓			b / g		Zune 3.1
Microsoft Zune 120	75	74	81	80	63	4:00	✓		✓			b / g		Zune 3.1
Creative Zen X-Fi WiFi	74	74	76	73	75	5:15		✓	✓	✓	✓	b / g		Centrale 1.0, Zen X-Fi Video Converter 1
Cowon D2+	70	74	67	43	100	9:00		✓	✓		✓			jetAudio Basic VX 7.1; Jet Video Converter 7
Creative Zen Mozaic (A)	68	74	75	30	100	9:00		✓	✓	✓	✓			Centrale 1.0
iRiver P7	67	63	78	40	91	7:30	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓			iriver plus 3.5, Movie Converter 11
iRiver E50	60	50	82	20	95	8:00	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓			iriver plus 3.3, Movie Converter 1

USING THE TABLE Scores The overall score is made up of: Ease of use: 30% Sound quality: 25% Video quality: 25% Battery life: 20% Battery life scores are calculated so that a player averaging nine hours or more gets 100%. The battery score is based on at least two tests. **Playback while recharging** means it's possible to listen to music while the player is recharging when connected to the mains power or your PC. **Wireless connectivity** Wi-Fi capability allows you to browse the internet using your existing Wi-Fi wireless connection at home or at a Wi-Fi hotspot when you're out and about (only the iPod touch and Archos had an internet browser). You can also listen to your music collection stored on your PC connected to a home network (802.11g) delivers a faster connection than 802.11b). **Mac compatible** While some of the models on test have limited functionality with Apple Mac OS, all are supported on Windows XP. **Capacity** is in gigabytes – 2GB can store about 500 songs of average length, while roughly four hours of good quality MP4 video.

WHAT TO LOOK FOR

Controls All media players on test can fast forward or rewind through media files but some have the main controls as easy-to-access buttons, rather than buried deep within a touch-screen menu.

Rechargeable battery Most media players have a built-in rechargeable (Li-polymer or Li-ion) battery pack you can recharge from your computer's USB port or an AC adapter. All the players on test use a rechargeable Li-ion battery.

Removable memory card support allows you to store photos and video clips and transfer them to a computer. You can also keep separate music/movie collections on multiple cards to use when needed. SD is used with the Creative Zen X-Fi and Cowon, and the iRiver P7 uses micro SD, storing music and video downloaded from either the internet or a PC.

Inbuilt memory Media players with inbuilt Flash memory can take more of a knob than those with a hard drive. However, hard drives are available with up to 120GB capacity while Flash memory tends to be limited to 32GB. The Sony PSP Slim & Lite uses an M2 card as its only means of storing music and video.



Computer connection type A USB connection allows you to transfer files to your computer. Some models use a commonly available mini or micro USB connection and can appear on the PC as an external drive.

Headphone connection A media player with a 2.5mm or 3.5mm jack will allow you to use a standard set of headphones if you don't like the set it comes with. All the models on test use a standard headphone connection.

Touch screens can make fine control difficult in some circumstances and some users may find finger marks irritating. Most media players use a resistive touch screen, where a finger or stylus can be used to make menu selections. The iPod touch is the only model on test to use a capacitive touch screen that reads the electrostatic charge of a finger, and does not require as decisive an imprint as the more commonly used resistive screen.

SPECIFICATIONS

Media container	Dimensions (mm, H x W x D)	Weight (g)	Storage type	Capacity (GB)	Displayable screen size (mm, W x H)	Screen resolution (pixels, W x H)	Minimum system requirements	Contact	Price (\$)
AVI, WMV, MPEG-4/2	79x127x13	266	HDD	60	99x62	800x480	MAC OS X, Linux, Win XP (SP2)	itechinternational.com	699
4V, MP4, MOV	104x62x11	147	HDD	120	50x37	320x240	Mac OS X v10.4.11, Win XP Home (SP3)	apple.com.au	339
P4	71x170x22	200	UMD/M2	0.9, 1.8	94x54	480x272	Win XP (SP2)	au.playstation.com/psp	300
4V, MP4, MOV	91x39x7	48	Flash	8	30x40	240x320	Mac OS X v10.4.11, Win XP Home (SP3)	apple.com.au	199
4V, MP4, MOV	111x62x9	122	Flash	32	49x75	320x480	Mac OS X v10.4.11, Win XP Home (SP3)	apple.com.au	549
ASF, MP4, WMV	92x42x10	64	Flash	8	27x36	240x320	Win XP (SP2)	zune.net	270
ASF, MP4, WMV	108x61x14	152	HDD	120	48x65	240x320	Win XP (SP2)	zune.net	440
MPV	83x55x14	81	Flash/SD	32	50x38	320x240	Win XP (SP2)	au.creative.com	400
AVI, WMV	56x78x17	102	Flash/SD	16	51x38	320x240	Win 98	cowonglobal.com	260
AVI (C)	80x40x14	97	Flash	8	28x35	128x160	Win XP (SP2)	au.creative.com	139
AVI, MPG, RM/RMVB, WMV	74x112x13	190	Flash/microSD	16	95x54	480x272	Win 2000	iriver.com.au	299
MPV	88x39x8	56	Flash	4	28x35	176x220	Win 2000	iriver.com.au	129

will take up about 1GB. **Software supplied** Apple players use iTunes, which can be downloaded for free from the Apple website. Other players without specific software can also use iTunes or Windows Media Player, except the Microsoft Zune models. **Price** Recommended retail, as of June 2009. **TABLE NOTES** * Battery life while playing video test was halted at nine hours. Previous tests used audio files so figures in this test are not comparable and will be shorter due to the increased processing power required to play video. (A) Discontinued, but may be available in some stores. New model is EZ300 with minor changes to configuration. (B) Unsupported formats can be synched but not played. (C) Supplied software required to transcode video so the media player will play the file. Also, video codecs are required to be preinstalled on PC. For music, player only plays SMV video which is not recognised by WMP. WMP will synch video in other formats to player, but the player will not play it.



STORY MATTHEW STEEN

Spinning the claims

Whether you're looking for a top- or front-loading machine, the sales jargon is enough to underwhelm you.

NUTSHELL

>> Marketing terms abound when researching your new washing machine.
>> We have added three new models from the latest round of testing to our What to Buy list.

Buying a new washing machine should be a simple process, but consumers can be bamboozled by confusing terminology bandied about by sales staff keen to entice you to spend more and maximise their sales. Unfortunately, all their jargon counts for nothing if you end up leaving the store with something you don't want.

CHOICE tested 12 new washing machines and we've added eight of them to the table of previously tested models (page 42). Only three of the newly tested machines made it into our What to Buy list – two in the medium (6kg-7kg) and one in the large (7.5kg or more) range.

Manufacturers create marketing terms to describe certain features and functions in their washing machines that sometimes don't relate very well to how they perform.

We've seen the following claims over the past couple of years for both top- and front-loading machines.

- **6th Sense** Claims to automatically select amount of water and adjust the washing program.
- **Airwash** uses heated air to clean clothes, claiming to eradicate odours and bacteria.
- **Aquasmart** Used by some water-efficient top-loading models (see *CHOICE*, September 2008 and table notes).
- **Diamond drum** The washer drum is claimed to make the machine gentler on clothes.
- **Direct drive** The motor is connected directly to the drum (rather than a belt or gear system with more moving parts). >

WHAT TO BUY

SMALL (UP TO 5.5KG)

FISHER & PAYKEL MW512 (tp) \$749

FISHER & PAYKEL GW512 (tp) \$859

MEDIUM (6KG-7KG)

ASKO QUATTRO W6362 1600rpm (fr) \$2199

MIELE Honeycomb Care W3725 (fr) \$2199

NEW FISHER & PAYKEL WH70F60W2 (fr) \$1139

NEW ELECTROLUX EWF1074 \$899

Time manager (fr) \$969

FISHER & PAYKEL GW612 (tp) \$969

LARGE (7.5KG OR MORE)

NEW ELECTROLUX EWF1083

Time manager (fr) \$1059

FISHER & PAYKEL Aquasmart

WL80T65CW1 (tp) \$1399

FISHER & PAYKEL Aquasmart

WL80T65DW1 (tp) \$1329

BOSCH Logixx 8 WAS28440AU (fr) \$2099

(fr) = Front loader (tp) = Top loader

MISSING MODELS

CHOICE has now tested so many washing machines they can't all fit into one table. To provide information about the best models, we've dropped from the table some that don't perform as well, but are still available in shops. You can check their details under the "Washing machines" articles on www.choiceextra.com.au. The missing models are shown here with their price and overall score.

6KG-7KG

BOSCH MAXX WAE24271AU, 66%, \$1429

SAMSUNG WF7708N6W, 66%, \$749

NEW SIMPSON SWT605 Ezi Sensor, 66%, \$799

NEW BOSCH WAE20261AU, 65%, \$1229

ELECTROLUX Water Aid EWT606SA, 65%, \$799

NEW WHIRLPOOL 6ALBR6245MW3, 65%, \$999

7.5KG OR LARGER

INDESIT SIXL126 Moon, 67%, \$1270

SAMSUNG SW80USP, 67%, \$949

SIMPSON Ezi Sensor SWT955SA, 66%, \$1059

ELECTROLUX Water Aid EWT806, 65%, \$1009

SIMPSON Eziset 750 22S750M, 64%, \$849

NEW INDESIT SIXL106 Moon, 61%, \$1059

WHAT TO BUY



75% Electrolux EWF1083

Time manager

PRICE \$1059

SIZE 8kg

TYPE Front loader

GOOD POINTS

- Long normal cycle time.
- Very good water efficiency.
- Extra features include: selectable spin speed (max 1000rpm), time remaining display, woollens wash, gentle/delicate wash, fast/quick wash (3kg load only) and out-of-balance correction.

BAD POINTS

- Scored only 63% for rinse performance.



74% Fisher & Paykel WH70F60W2

PRICE \$1139

SIZE 7kg

TYPE Front loader

GOOD POINTS

- Very good water efficiency.
- Extra features include: selectable spin speed (max 1200rpm), time remaining display, woollens wash, gentle/delicate wash, fast/quick wash (2.5kg load only), extra rinse option, out-of-balance correction.

BAD POINTS

- Lowest wash temperature for cottons is 30°C.



73% Electrolux EWF1074

Time manager

PRICE \$899

SIZE 7kg

TYPE Front loader

GOOD POINTS

- Very good water efficiency.
- Extra features include: selectable spin speed (max 1000rpm), time remaining display, gentle/delicate program, quick wash (as an option, not program), extra rinse option, out-of-balance correction.

BAD POINTS

- Only OK spin score.
- Lowest wash temperature for cottons is 30°C.

Newly tested

Three new models that made it into the What to Buy list are profiled here. For profiles of the other models in the list, see *CHOICE*, March 2009 and September 2008, or go to www.choiceextra.com.au and click on the Emagazine or "Washing machines" in the index.

ABOUT THE REST

The table on page 42 summarises the performance scores, features and specifications for all the models tested. The following explains why the rest of the newly tested models didn't make it into the What to Buy list.

6KG-7KG

The **Miele, Simpson SWF1076** and the new **Bosch** model are gentle on clothes and score very well for water efficiency, but only the Miele scores OK for rinse performance, with the others getting poor scores. The Bosch model has the quickest normal cycle time for a front loader at 49 minutes.

The **Miele, Simpson SWF1076** and **Whirlpool 6ALBR6245MW3** do not have a true cold wash for cottons.

The **Whirlpool 6ALBR6245MW3**, **Miele** and both **Simpsons** have good dirt removal and the Whirlpool also has very good rinse performance scores, but is let down by its spin efficiency, gentleness and water efficiency performance.

The **Simpson SWT605 Ezi Sensor** has good dirt removal and water efficiency scores, but is let down by poor gentleness and only 56% spin efficiency score.

7.5KG OR LARGER

The **Electrolux EWF1481** has very good water and spin efficiency scores, but is let down by its rinse performance score.

The **Maytag 6AMTW5555TQ** is very good for dirt removal and rinsing, but is let down by its gentleness and spin efficiency scores.

Both the **LG WD12020D** and **Indesit SIXL106** have a very good water efficiency score, but both are let down by poor rinse performance. There is no window, so the washing cannot be seen in the Indesit SIXL106 and it pauses for a minute after the tone at the end of a wash.

PRODUCT	PERFORMANCE											FEATURES			
	Type	Overall score (%)	Dirt removal score (%)	Rinse performance score (%)	Gentleness score (%)	Water efficiency score (%)	Spin efficiency score (%)	Water used (L, normal cycle)	Cycle time (min, normal wash)	Noise (dB)	Gentle / delicates cycle	Woolens cycle (machine / hand washable)	Out-of-balance correction	Selectable spin speed	Auto. rewash function
UP TO 5.5KG															
Fisher & Paykel MW512	Top / agitator	72	79	90	53	52	69	132	44	69	✓	✓ / -	✓	✓	✓
Fisher & Paykel GW512	Top / agitator	71	77	90	52	53	69	131	45	67	✓	✓ / -	✓	✓	✓
Simpson EziSet 36S550M	Top / agitator	68	70	83	56	58	61	115	49	60	✓	✓ / -	ns		
Samsung SW50USP	Top / impeller	66	66	94	68	40	47	151	57	62	✓	- / -	ns		✓
Simpson Ezi Sensor SWT552SA	Top / agitator	66	70	67	46	77	57	63	69	66	✓	✓ / -	✓		✓
6KG TO 7KG															
Asko Quattro W6362 1600rpm	Front	75	71	74	75	79	82	64	81	72	✓	✓ / ✓	✓	✓	✓
Miele Honeycomb Care W3725	Front	75 (F)	81	65	76	85	79	50	112	64	✓	✓ / ✓	✓	✓	✓
#Fisher & Paykel WH70F60W2	Front	74 (F)	77	73	72	81	75	68	115	62	✓	✓ / -	✓	✓	✓
#Electrolux EWF1074 Time manager	Front	73 (F)	75	73	76	80	68	69	126	60	✓	- / -	✓	✓	ns
Fisher & Paykel GW612	Top / agitator	73	83	91	48	52	69	157	47	69	✓	✓ / -	✓	✓	✓
AEG Electrolux Lavamat L74800 (A)	Front	72 (F)	74	66	76	83	76	60	108	71	✓	✓ / ✓	✓	✓	✓
Asko Quattro W6342	Front	72	72	57	78	83	74	53	86	69	✓	✓ / ✓	✓	✓	✓
Miele Honeycomb Care W1712	Front	72 (F)	81	55	73	85	70	51	113	63	✓	✓ / ✓	✓	✓	✓
AEG L62800 (A)	Front	71 (F)	75	58	79	83	71	61	108	64	✓	✓ / ✓	✓	✓	✓
Asko Quattro W6222 1200rpm	Front	71	72	55	76	83	70	52	101	69	✓	✓ / ✓	✓	✓	✓
Fisher & Paykel Aquasmart WL70T60C (B)	Top / impeller	71	80	58	57	81	67	66	58	57	✓	✓ / -	✓	✓	✓
Fisher & Paykel Aquasmart WL70T60D (B)	Top / impeller	71	80	58	57	81	67	66	58	57	✓	✓ / -	✓	✓	✓
#Miele W1611	Front	71 (F)	77	57	75	84	73	53	112	62	✓	✓ / ✓	✓		ns
Bosch Maxx WAE22460AU 1100rpm (C)	Front	69	61	68	79	82	72	64	77	66	✓	✓ / ✓	✓	✓	✓
#Simpson SWF1076	Front	68 (F)	75	45	75	85	68	54	109	64	✓	- / -	✓	✓	ns
7.5KG OR LARGER															
#Electrolux EWF1083 Time manager	Front	75	79	63	74	83	71	68	111	62	✓	✓ / -	✓	✓	ns
Fisher & Paykel Aquasmart WL80T65CW1 (B)	Top / impeller	75	81	74	58	81	74	76	58	63	✓	✓ / -	✓	✓	✓
Fisher & Paykel Aquasmart WL80T65DW1 (B)	Top / impeller	75	81	74	58	81	74	76	58	63	✓	✓ / -	✓	✓	✓
Bosch Logixx 8 WAS28440AU (D)	Front	74	67	83	76	78	75	87	73	65	✓	✓ / ✓	✓	✓	✓
Bosch Logixx 8 WAS32741AU	Front	73	74	55	77	84	80	62	87	63	✓	✓ / ✓	✓	✓	✓
Maytag MAF8512AAW (A)	Front	72	73	55	77	83	75	73	164	65	✓	✓ / -	✓	✓	✓
Whirlpool WFS1285AW	Front	72	73	55	77	83	75	73	164	65	✓	✓ / -	✓	✓	✓
#Electrolux EWF1481 Time manager	Front	71	72	48	74	86	83	55	93	68	✓	✓ / -	✓	✓	ns
#Maytag 6AMTW5555TQ	Top	71 (F)	80	85	47	62	55	153	61	62	✓	✓ / -		✓	ns
Fisher & Paykel WH80F60W1	Front	70 (F)	72	59	76	83	73	68	114	64	✓	✓ / ✓	✓	✓	✓
Whirlpool WFS1071BW (E)	Front	70 (F)	75	58	75	84	69	59	151	66	✓	✓ / ✓	✓	✓	✓
Whirlpool 6ALS08000MW3	Top / agitator	70 (F)	78	86	55	58	53	157	47	62	✓	✓ / -			
Whirlpool 6ALSRT244MW3	Top / agitator	70 (F)	78	86	55	58	53	157	47	62	✓	✓ / -			
Ariston Aqualis AQXXD 149H	Front	69	71	46	74	86	78	58	116	65	✓	✓ / ✓	✓	✓	✓
Fisher & Paykel GW712	Top / agitator	69	75	90	43	53	69	176	49	62	✓	✓ / -	✓	✓	✓
#LG WD12020D Direct Drive	Front	69	74	35	74	87	81	50	141	67	✓	✓ / -		✓	✓
Simpson Ezi Sensor SWT802SA	Top / agitator	69	76	67	50	79	63	85	71	65	✓	✓ / -	✓		✓

SPECIFICATIONS						COSTS		
Tap connection	Coldest wash temperature for normal wash (°C)*	Capacity (kg)	Claimed dimensions (cm, H x W x D)	Contact		Running costs (\$ / 10 years)	Running costs (\$ / 10 years) + price (\$)	Price (\$)
H & C, C	Cold	5.5	105 x 56 x 56	www.fp.com.au		582	1331	749
H & C, C	Cold	5.5	105 x 56 x 56	www.fp.com.au		564	1423	859
H & C	Cold	5.5	115 x 60 x 64	www.simpson.com.au		513	1152	639
H & C, C	Cold	5	86 x 54 x 56	www.samsung.com.au		614	1163	549
H & C	Cold	5.5	115 x 60 x 64	www.simpson.com.au		312	1001	689
C only	Cold	6	85 x 60 x 59	www.asko.com.au		312	2511	2199
C only	30	6.5	85 x 60 x 58	www.miele.com.au		369	2568	2199
H & C	30	7	84 x 60 x 54	www.fp.com.au		476	1615	1139
C only	30	7	85 x 60 x 63	www.electrolux.com.au		492	1391	899
H & C, C	Cold	6.5	105 x 60 x 60	www.fp.com.au		688	1657	969
C only	30	7	85 x 60 x 64	www.aeg-electrolux.com.au		418	2217	1799
C only	Cold	6	85 x 60 x 59	www.asko.com.au		291	2190	1899
C only	30	6.5	86 x 60 x 64	www.miele.com.au		336	2335	1999
C only	30	7	85 x 60 x 64	www.aeg-electrolux.com.au		405	2004	1599
C only	Cold	6	85 x 60 x 59	www.asko.com.au		319	2118	1799
H & C	Cold	7	102 x 60 x 60	www.fp.com.au		364	1663	1299
H & C	Cold	7	102 x 60 x 60	www.fp.com.au		364	1593	1229
C only	30	6.5	85 x 60 x 63	www.miele.com.au		388	2187	1799
C only	Cold	7	85 x 60 x 59	www.boschappliances.com.au		342	1741	1399
C only	30	7	85 X 60 X 63	www.simpson.com.au		383	1182	799
C only	Cold	8	85 x 60 x 63	www.electrolux.com.au		427	1486	1059
H & C	Cold	8	105 x 65 x 65	www.fp.com.au		399	1798	1399
H & C	Cold	8	105 x 65 x 65	www.fp.com.au		399	1728	1329
C only	Cold	8	84 x 60 x 59	www.boschappliances.com.au		443	2542	2099
C only	Cold	8	85 x 60 x 59	www.boschappliances.com.au		353	2752	2399
H & C, C	Cold	8.5	85 x 60 x 60	www.maytag.com.au		452	2351	1899
H & C, C	Cold	8.5	85 x 60 x 60	www.whirlpool.com.au		452	2101	1649
C only	Cold	8	85 x 60 x 63	www.electrolux.com.au		361	1890	1529
H & C	Cold (G)	8	108 x 69 x 69	www.maytag.com.au		1250	2949	1699
H & C, C	30	8	84 x 60 x 59	www.fp.com.au		447	1796	1349
H & C	30	7.5	85 x 60 x 58	www.whirlpool.com.au		577	1426	849
H & C	Cold (H)	7.5	109 x 69 x 68	www.whirlpool.com.au		1153	2252	1099
H & C	Cold (H)	7.5	109 x 69 x 68	www.whirlpool.com.au		1153	2202	1049
H & C	Cold	8.5	105 x 60 x 65	www.aristonchannel.com		370	2669	2299
H & C	Cold	7.5	102 X 65 X 65	www.fp.com.au		757	1846	1089
H & C	Cold	7.5	85 x 60 x 55	www.lge.com.au		307	1306	999
H & C	Cold	8	120 x 70 x 73	www.simpson.com.au		415	1364	949

USING THE TABLE

Scores The overall score is made up of:

- Dirt removal: 40%
- Rinse performance: 20%
- Gentleness: 15%
- Water efficiency: 15%
- Spin efficiency: 10%

Cold wash penalty As the majority of Australians now wash in cold water straight from the tap, we have applied a small penalty in our overall score to models that cannot do a proper cold wash (at about 20°C) on the normal cycle. While the higher wash temperature may slightly increase a machine's scores for dirt removal and rinse effectiveness, it also means it's using more energy than it would if it were able to do a true cold wash: our penalty compensates for this.

Dirt removal The machine we use to measure this (a spectrophotometer) is more accurate than the human eye – differences of about 6% are visible.

Features See What to Look For, page 44, for details.

Tap connection Some machines need both hot and cold water to operate; others can connect to cold water only and may need a special connector or sealing cap for the hot water inlet. A machine with a heater (front loaders only) can be particularly useful if you connect to cold only, as it still gives you the option of a warm or hot wash.

Dimensions are for the smallest box that fits around the machine, as stated by the manufacturer.

Running costs This is an estimate of how much it will cost for water and electricity over 10 years if you wash the equivalent of one load every day using a normal cycle, based on 17 cents per kWh of electricity and \$1 per 1000L for water. It also includes electricity used when the machine is connected to a power source but not in use. It does not include detergent.

Price Recommended or average retail, May 2009.

TABLE NOTES

Newly tested models.

[Similar models.

* Cold = cold tap water (20°C).

ns Not stated.

(A) Discontinued but may still be available in shops.

(B) We have received feedback about the Fisher & Paykel Aquasmart models leaving detergent residue on clothes. Our rinse test only measures the soluble component of detergent left in the clothes, so we did not see this. Overall they are very good performers and so remain in our What to Buy list, however if this problem occurs, our research detailed in **CHOICE**, September 2008, page 42 (or www.choiceextra.com.au) offers some advice.

(C) This machine was also tested using the intensive option which the manufacturer recommends to use when washing a full load. While using this option improves the dirt removal, the time taken to complete a rinse is significantly increased. Results are: Overall 74%; Dirt removal 74%; Rinse performance 69%; Gentleness 72%; Spin efficiency 74%; Water efficiency 81%; Water used 65.1L. Cycle time 158 minutes.

(D) The manufacturer recommends using the intensive button for a full load. Using this option will most likely improve the dirt removal and overall score, but time will also be increased.

(E) Discontinued. Replaced by BD version, cosmetic changes only.

(F) Penalty applied because the machine cannot do a cold wash – see Cold Wash Penalty, above.

(G) Even though machine has a "cold" wash, this cycle uses hot water and reaches a temperature of 21°C.

(H) Even though machine has a "cold" wash, this cycle uses hot water and reaches a temperature of 24°C.

Top loaders are usually less expensive to buy and more common than front-loading machines, but this price gap is narrowing.



To get the best deal on a washing machine, call CHOICE Shopper, 1300 360 655, with the model name and number, the price you want to beat and your CHOICE personal subscriber number. The full selection of models in this test may not be available in all states.

WHAT TO LOOK FOR

For **comprehensive information** on what to look for in a washing machine, see *CHOICE*, March 2007, or go to www.choiceextra.com.au and click on that issue in the index under "Washing machines".

Gentle / delicates cycle reduces wear and tear on a garment by increasing water and lowering spin/agitation speeds or skipping the spin cycle, which tends to leave the garments less creased. In our 2008 Appliance Survey, 45% of respondents find this one of the five most desirable features in a washing machine.

Woolens cycle (machine / hand washable) programs relate to the instructions on a garment advising if it's machine washable or for hand wash only. Washers with a hand wash function claim this program is gentle enough for hand-wash only items.

- **Honeycomb drum** The coating on the washer drum is claimed to make the machine gentler on clothes.
- **Smart Drive** Claims to sense the movement of the clothes and adjust the agitation accordingly.
- **Silver nano** Claims to create an anti-bacterial "coating" on your clothing.
- **Steam refresh** Claims its use of steam deodorises clothes without using detergent and clothes are less creased.
- **Time manager** A function that claims to reduce the washing cycle time, dependent on the amount of dirt.
- **Turbo drum** The drum turns in the opposite direction to the agitator, claiming to make clothes tangle less.

From top to front

If you're about to buy a new washing machine, swapping from a top to a front loader may have crossed your mind. Top loaders are traditionally less expensive to buy and more common than front loaders, but this price gap is narrowing, and with front loader prices dropping, their market share is expected to increase. What can you expect if you change from a top- to a front-loading machine?

Pros A front-loading machine uses less water, is gentler on your clothes, uses less detergent and is cheaper to run. They're generally better for smaller spaces and have higher spin speeds, which means they remove more moisture from the clothes, allowing them to dry quicker. **Cons** Front-loading machines generally take longer to complete a normal or default washing cycle – sometimes more than two hours (however, many models have a quick cycle). They are slightly more expensive and heavier when you need to move them. Many models also don't allow you to add clothes to the machine after the program has started. Whether these drawbacks are deal-breakers will depend on your priorities. ■

ACCESSIBILITY

If you are in a wheelchair or have back pain, a front-loading machine elevated off the floor will be easiest to use.

If you have upper limb dysfunction or weakness, the **Bosch models** are easy to open and reach into and the controls easy to operate.

For those with vision impairment, the **Indesit** and **Simpson SWT605 EZI Sensor** are recommended because of their colour contrast and the auditory feedback on the controls.

Machines that can be preset and activated with one or two actions are best for people with a cognitive impairment. Only the **Maytag 6AMTW5555TQ** is recommended due to its simplicity, clarity of controls and labelling.

HOW WE TEST

Dirt removal score indicates how much dirt the machines remove. Our testers pin specially soiled swatches onto a standard load of washing and measure how much light is reflected from them before and using a "normal" cold wash program and a standard detergent. The more light reflected, the higher the score and the cleaner the machine has washed the swatch.

Rinse performance This is how well the machines rinse out the soluble components of the detergent. To measure rinse performance, our testers add a marker chemical to the wash. At the end, they take a sample of the water remaining in the clothes to determine the amount of chemical left – the less there is, the better the rinse. In our report on washing machines last year we also looked out how to minimise effects of detergent residue. For details, refer to *CHOICE* September 2008, page 42, or go to www.choiceextra.com.au.

Gentleness is tested by attaching swatches of easily frayed fabric to the washing and measuring the unfrayed area before and after the wash.

Spin efficiency is tested by weighing the clothes before and after the wash to see how much water is left in them.

Water efficiency This measures the amount of water used in a cycle (on a "normal" wash program). The score is based on how much water is used for each kilogram of washing – the less the better.



STORY MATTHEW STEEN

Treasure chests

These freezers perform well, but beware some hidden pitfalls.

NUTSHELL

>> On test: six chest freezers ranging in price from \$489 to \$669.
>> Chest freezers are not ergonomically designed, so you need to be healthy and flexible to reach into their depths.

Chest freezers are designed for bulk buying and long-term storage – useful in these belt-tightening economic times. When CHOICE last tested upright and chest freezers nearly a decade ago we found that uprights, although much more convenient, are less efficient. Chest freezers were more energy efficient and had better temperature performance, partly because the cold stays in the freezer when the lid is opened, whereas in an upright it falls out of the opened door. Chest freezers are less expensive than uprights and account for over a third of the market share of freezer-only sales in Australia.

However, we don't recommend one type over the other, as they are suited to different types of use – uprights for convenience and daily use and chest freezers for long-term storage. An upright can be part of a pigeon pair combination in the kitchen, whereas a chest freezer is often located elsewhere.

Design flaws

The sacrifice for chest freezers' lower price and better performance is in their design; all the models on test require you to be fit and flexible to reach deep into the body.

Furthermore, none is frost-free, which means manual defrosting is required – typically, transferring all the items to another cold storage then scraping the ice from the walls and floor of the freezer. Once the ice has melted, the water drains from a rather inconvenient spout located close to the ground. >

WHAT TO BUY

Fisher & Paykel H160S	\$489
Fisher & Paykel H220X	\$599

WHAT TO LOOK FOR

Look for a freezer that will fit your **space requirements**, making sure the controls will not be blocked by other appliances or cupboards.

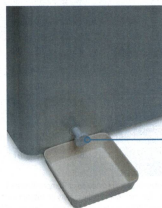
A number of **baskets or partitions** will help you organise the freezer for later retrieval of the long-lost chicken. Optional extra baskets offered by Fisher & Paykel and Haier models mean you at least have the potential to make organising the freezer easier.

The **control placement** makes a big difference in being able to use the freezer. Look for accessibility, ease of understanding and adjustability.

Some freezers are built with **soft, thin aluminium liners**; look for heavy duty liners that won't damage easily.

Rollers can assist with moving the freezer if you need to manoeuvre it into place or remove it; only the Lemair model has rollers.

An **interior light** under the lid of the freezer can be useful. Both the Westinghouse and Fisher & Paykel H220X have interior lights.



A defrost drain that is easily accessible and high enough for a suitable container will make manual defrosting a simpler chore.

The way these freezers are currently designed, after a few months all your food could develop a white frost and look the same.

ACCESSIBILITY

None of the freezers on test is recommended for anyone with any disability. A frost-free upright freezer is more suitable.

Compartmentalised

Another design flaw in chest freezers is the lack of compartments. None of the models on test comes with more than one basket, and only the Fisher & Paykel models have a basket you can adapt so it sits on the floor of the freezer. Small items can fall to the freezer floor through the gaps between other food, making them more difficult to get out.

The way they are currently designed, after a few months – or sooner if you open your freezer often – all your food could develop a white frost and look the same, and choosing dinner may become somewhat of a lucky dip.

More baskets and partitions would potentially help with this problem, and we're disappointed more baskets are not included in the purchase price, as organising the freezer would be easier.

Only Fisher & Paykel and Haier offer extra baskets, priced at \$45 and \$30 respectively. Of those, only the Fisher & Paykel ones can be stacked up on top of one another easily for a better storage solution to stacking individual items. ■

HOW WE TEST

Temperature performance Our testers check how well each freezer maintains steady temperatures. They also check how it copes with changes in room temperatures, as well as how uniform the temperatures remain within the compartment (are there warm or cold spots?), if the freezer allows a good range of appropriate temperature choices, and if the mid setting of the control gives an appropriate temperature.

Ease of use includes:

- Storage, access and general versatility: 60%
- Cleaning: 30%
- Controls: 10%

Energy efficiency Our testers measure energy use and the energy efficiency of all models.

Cool-down This is how long it takes to cool the air in an empty freezer, from 32°C to -13°C in a very warm temperature-controlled room.

Warm-up This is a test of each freezer's insulation, giving an indication of how it would perform in a power failure. They're switched off in an ambient temperature of 32°C; the test starts when the temperature inside the freezer is -15°C and ends at -5°C – the longer it takes, the better. It's a comparative test and the actual times will be longer with food in the freezer, so we've only printed the score.

PRODUCT	PERFORMANCE										SPECIFICATIONS		
	Overall score (%)	Temperature performance score (%)	Ease of use score (%)	Energy efficiency score (%)	Cool-down score (%)	Warm-up score (%)	Cooling time (hr:min)	Claimed / measured energy use (kWh / year)	Noise level (dBA)	Dimensions (cm, H x W x D)	Claimed volume (L)	Contact	10-year running costs (\$)
Brand / model (in rank order)													Price (\$)
Fisher & Paykel H160S	75	92	52	69	80	52	2:05	303 / 303	31	90 x 61 x 66	164	www.fp.com.au	303 489
Fisher & Paykel H220X	75	89	52	75	80	52	2:04	342 / 325	33	90 x 75 x 66	216	www.fp.com.au	325 599
Haier HCF208A	72	79	46	83	90	47	1:25	316 / 271	31	85 x 95 x 56	202	www.haier.com.au	271 579
Westinghouse WCM2100WA	70	82	52	68	78	50	2:12	349 / 357	32	91 x 72 x 66	207	www.westinghouse.com.au	357 669
Kelvinator KCM1500WB	68	79	51	62	84	50	1:48	300 / 314	34	91 x 56 x 66	145	www.kelvinator.com.au	314 529
Lemair CF-200K	67	82	46	61	78	49	2:11	334 / 384	32	83 x 100 x 57	200	www.winningappliances.com.au	384 499

USING THE TABLE Scores The overall score is made up of: Temperature performance: 40% Ease of use: 20% Energy efficiency: 20% Cooling-down: 12% Warm-up: 8% **Noise level** is a measurement of comparative loudness. This does not relate to the quality or irritation of the sound. Freezers can sound noticeably louder as the compressor starts and stops. **Dimensions** do not include the recommended air gaps required to keep the unit cool, and for opening the door. **Claimed volume** is how much air space the freezer has to cool; for chest freezers most of this space is available for storage. **Running costs** are calculated at a rate of 17¢ per kWh. A 10-year period gives a useful indication of the long-term differences between high and low energy use – and you should be able to expect your freezer to last at least this long. **Price** Recommended retail, as of April 2009.

WHAT TO BUY



75% Fisher & Paykel H160S

PRICE \$489

GOOD POINTS

- Good performer overall.
- Excellent temperature score.
- Controls allow a very good range of temperatures.
- Handles ambient change extremely well.
- Optional extra baskets add versatility.

BAD POINTS

- Not good for insulation, which hinders efficiency and ability to maintain cold temperatures during a blackout.
- Only 52% for ease of use.
- Conventional controls means setting the temperature tends to be trial and error, particularly as the controls may be confusing.
- Controls are located on the side and may be inaccessible.
- No rollers to assist with moving.



75% Fisher & Paykel H220X

PRICE \$599

GOOD POINTS

- Good performer overall.
- Very good temperature score.
- Controls allow a very good range of temperatures.
- Handles ambient change extremely well.
- Optional extra baskets add versatility.
- Has an interior light.

BAD POINTS

- Not good for insulation, which hinders efficiency and ability to maintain cold temperatures during a blackout.
- Only 52% for ease of use.
- Conventional controls means setting the temperature tends to be trial and error, particularly as the controls may be confusing.
- Controls are located on the side and may be inaccessible.
- No rollers to assist with moving.

More baskets in these freezers would allow you to arrange food so it's easily accessible.

MINIMUM ENERGY PERFORMANCE

Freezers and refrigerators must meet a Minimum Energy Performance Standard (MEPS) to be sold in Australia. The MEPS requirements apply to a model in general rather than every unit, however from 2010 new MEPS levels will apply and each freezer and fridge must meet the minimum levels. Of the models on test, the Kelvinator, Westinghouse and Lemair do not meet the current MEPS cut-off energy values. The first two were only slightly over their energy labels.

ABOUT THE REST

The **Haier** and **Kelvinator** have the best cool-down scores, but are let down by their ease of use and warm-up scores.

The **Westinghouse** and **Lemair** have very good temperature scores, however the Westinghouse scored only 50% and the Lemair 49% for warm-up. They are both also let down by their ease of use.

All but the Lemair have a two-year warranty, the Lemair having a one-year warranty.

choice shopper

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STORY MARTHA PSIROUKIS

Mixing it up

Save dough by baking more pizzas, cakes and biscuits at home.

NUTSHELL

- >> Benchtop mixers can be expensive to buy, but the long-term savings can outweigh the initial cost.
- >> They're a fast and easy way to prepare foods in bulk and freeze for later.

Baking cakes, biscuits, breads and pizza dough from scratch with a good benchtop mixer is fast and easy, costs less than shop-bought ones and is better for your health. Most mixers on test are big and can cope with larger quantities for freezing and time savings later on and most types of dough, including biscuit dough, freeze well.

A good benchtop mixer can knead a perfect ball of pizza dough in less than five minutes, leaving your hands free to prepare the toppings. Although proving dough can take between 30 and 45 minutes, it's at a fraction of the cost, salt and fat content of a ready-made pizza. Go to www.choice.com.au/recipes for a delicious and easy recipe.

Mixers with excellent results for kneading, mixing and whisking are those with single tool attachments, but they are usually more expensive. Single dough hooks are best as they can handle heavier loads and there's no need to complete the dough manually. They are for the serious and regular cook, and are ideal for batch preparation.

For the occasional cook, a cheaper twin-beater type may be all you need, but you will have to finish the dough by hand. See What to Buy or the table, below, for details. >

WHAT TO BUY

Models in the What to Buy list have a slight edge over others tested, but most mixers performed well overall. Check individual performance and ease of use scores, and compare details in About The Rest on page 50, as models further down the table may still suit your needs and be cheaper to buy.

Single-attachment mixers

Kenwood kMix Stand Mixer KMX51 \$749

KitchenAid Artisan Mixer 5KSM150PS \$799

Kenwood Chef Kitchen Machine KM315A950 / KM300 **BEST BUY** \$599 / \$449

Twin-attachment mixers

Sunbeam Mixmaster Series II MX7700 **BEST BUY** \$219

PRODUCT	PERFORMANCE							FEATURES		
Brand / model (in rank order within groups)	Overall score (%)	Performance score (%)	Ease of use score (%)	Whisk (egg white)	Beater (mixing cake)	Pizza dough (dough hook)	Noise (dBA)	Whisk	Dough hook	Beater
SINGLE-ATTACHMENT MIXERS										
Kenwood kMix Stand Mixer KMX51	89	97	77	100	90	100	76	✓	✓	✓
KitchenAid Artisan Mixer 5KSM150PS	87	100	68	100	100	100	80	✓	✓	✓
Kenwood Chef Kitchen Machine KM315A950	86	92	78	100	75	100	80	✓	✓	✓
Kenwood Chef Kitchen Machine KM300 (A)	86	92	78	100	75	100	80	✓	✓	✓
Breville Wizz Mix Professional BEM400	84	92	73	100	75	100	66	✓	✓	✓
Kenwood Patissier KM270	84	92	73	75	100	100	64	✓	✓	✓
Eurolab Multi-Function Stand Mixer YD-388	84	92	72	100	75	100	80	✓	✓	✓
TWIN-ATTACHMENT MIXERS										
Sunbeam Mixmaster Series II MX7700	82	88	73	100	75	90	78		✓	✓
Sunbeam Café Series Mixmaster MX8900	81	88	70	100	75	90	82	✓	✓	✓
Sunbeam Mixmaster MX001	80	83	75	100	75	75	68		✓	✓
Sunbeam Mixmaster Compact Pro MX5950	71	68	75	75	50	80	78		✓	✓
Breville Wizz Electronic Mixer BEM200C	57	50	68	100	25 (B)	25	77		✓	

USING THE TABLE Scores Overall score is made up of: Performance: 60% Ease of use: 40% Noise This is the noise measured at arm's length (0.5m) from the mixer when it's operating at its highest speed. Most models on test are fairly noisy. **Features** See What to Look For, opposite, for an explanation of these features.

Price Recommended retail, as of June 2009.

WHAT TO LOOK FOR

A **splashguard** prevents ingredients from spilling out of the bowl, including flour, which produces a cloud of dust when added to the bowl while mixing. Some splashguards include a chute for adding ingredients directly to the bowl without having to stop the machine and lift the motor head.

A range of speed settings is essential: slow for kneading and folding; light mixing for puddings and muffins; creaming/beating for butter and sugar, and heavy batters; whipping/aerating speed for cream, egg white and meringues. Six speeds are probably enough.

Bowl lock This keeps the bowl stable during mixing. Only the Breville Wizz Electronic Mixer BEM200C and Sunbeam Mixmaster MX001 don't have this.

Spring-loaded tilt-head allows for an easy and smooth lift. This feature was most effective in the Kenwood Chef Kitchen Machine KM315A950 and KM300.

Stainless steel bowls are extremely durable and should last the life of the mixer. Glass or plastic bowls may be hard to replace if you break them.

Easy-release button for the beater(s) prevents your hands from getting covered in messy ingredients when removing it; all the twin-attachment models have this feature.

A single dough hook is particularly useful if you make a lot of bread. The models with the single dough hook completed the job better than those with twin dough hooks.

A heavy duty beater is likely to be the most frequently used tool for cakes and savoury dishes.

Whisk attachment is perfect for creating foamy whipped mixtures. The Sunbeam Café Series Mixmaster MX8900 has twin whisk attachments.



SPECIFICATIONS

	Number of speeds	Bowl lock	Spring-loaded motor head	Dishwasher safe	Bowl type	Dimensions (cm, H x W x D)*	Weight (kg)**	Wattage (W)	Bowl capacity (L)	Contact	Price (\$)
✓	8	✓		✓ (C)	SS	36 x 40 x 26	8.5	500	4.6	www.kenwood-australia.com	749
10	✓			✓ (D)	SS	35 x 34 x 25	10.5	300 (G)	4.8	www.petermcinnes.com.au	799
8	✓	✓	✓	✓ (E)	SS	30 x 40 x 23	6.4	700	4.6	www.kenwood-australia.com	599
8	✓	✓	✓	✓ (E)	Plastic	30 x 40 x 27	6.1	700	4.3	www.kenwood-australia.com	449
6	✓			✓ (C)	SS	36 x 39 x 23	7.2	700	4.2	www.breville.com.au	339
12	✓	✓		✓ (C)	SS	37 x 39 x 25	7.6	400	4.0	www.kenwood-australia.com	349
6	✓	✓	✓		SS	39 x 45 x 27	8.7	1000	5.0	www.dealsdirect.com.au	199
12	✓			✓ (C)	SS	27 x 35 x 24	5.4	600	4.0	www.sunbeam.com.au	219
12	✓			✓ (C)	SS	38 x 34 x 23	5.5	850	4.4 / 2.1	www.sunbeam.com.au	549
12				✓ (E)	Glass	26 x 33 x 24	5.3	370	3.5 / 1.6	www.sunbeam.com.au	219
10	✓			✓ (F)	SS	31 x 33 x 23	3	400	3.0	www.sunbeam.com.au	139
12				✓ (E)	SS	33 x 34 x 25	3.2	600	4.0 / 1.8	www.breville.com.au	199

TABLE NOTES * Positioned with the controls at the front; includes the bowl. ** Includes cord, bowl and beaters. SS Stainless steel. (A) Discontinued, but may still be in some stores. (B) You can get better results using the small mixing bowl, i.e. portions suitable for an 18cm/20cm round or square cake tin. (C) Bowl and attachments. (D) Bowl and attachments except for whisk. (E) Bowl only. (F) All attachments but not the bowl. (G) Average power used – it adjusts power as needed.

Did you know?

You can make double the number of pizzas and freeze half for a fast dinner when you need it. Use toppings that freeze well, such as cheese, cold or cooked meats, seafood and vegetables with low water content. Keep some biscuit dough in the freezer and whip up freshly baked cookies when unexpected guests pop in.



To get the best deal on a benchtop mixer, call CHOICE Shopper, 1300 360 655, with the model name and number, the price you want to beat and your CHOICE personal subscriber number. The full selection of models in this test may not be available in all states.

WHAT TO BUY

Single-attachment mixers

89% Kenwood kMix Stand Mixer KMX51

PRICE \$749

GOOD POINTS

- Perfect scores for pizza dough and whisking egg whites.
- Very easy to lift and lower the motor head – very smooth action.
- Has a pouring chute/splashguard for adding ingredients and containing splatter.
- The pouring chute/splashguard attaches to the motor head, making access easier when scraping down ingredients.
- The power switches off when the motor head is raised.
- Very easy to insert attachments.
- Comes with a spatula.
- The bowl and attachments are dishwasher-safe.
- Available in three colours.

BAD POINTS

- No eject button; attachments easy to remove, but can be messy.
- Jolts slightly when kneading dough; also moves a little on the bench.
- Comparatively noisy and expensive.



87% KitchenAid Artisan Mixer 5KSM150PS

PRICE \$799

GOOD POINTS

- Highest performance score – perfect scores for kneading pizza dough, mixing cake and whisking egg whites.
- Has a pouring chute/splashguard for adding ingredients and containing splatter.
- Very easy to insert attachments.
- Bowl and attachments are dishwasher-safe.
- The height of the beaters can be adjusted.
- The machine stays firm on the bench when in use, even when kneading dough.
- Many optional accessories available, such as mincer and pasta rollers/cutters.
- Available in 20 colours in a retro look (but also has a retro feel about it, which is reflected in its lower ease of use score).
- Five-year warranty.

BAD POINTS

- Not as easy to use as the others on test.
- The splashguard needs to be removed to scrape down the mixture.
- No eject button; attachments easy to remove, but can be messy.
- The motor head is heavy and isn't spring-loaded.
- Comparatively noisy and expensive.



ABOUT THE REST

SINGLE-ATTACHMENT MIXERS

The **Breville Wizz Mix Professional BEM400**, **Kenwood Patissier KM270** and **Eurolab** all scored 84% overall, with good to excellent results for individual performance scores. The **Eurolab** is the largest and one of the loudest models on test and is only available for purchase online. The **Kenwood** is the quietest but also has the least amount of "oomph" when mixing – so much so that we thought it was faulty and had it replaced, but the second sample also demonstrated the same weak mixing power. The sound of the motor changes when in use, a bit like a power surge, and isn't very fast on the highest power setting. All jolt slightly when kneading, and the **Breville** slides a little on the bench.

TWIN-ATTACHMENT MIXERS

All twin beaters need to be in the correct position to be inserted, which can be fiddly,

but good labelling and diagrams on the unit can help. Only the **Sunbeam Café Series MX8900**, **Mixmaster MX001** and **Compact Pro MX5950** have these. The **Breville Wizz Electronic Mixer BEM200C** has different-sized collars on the beaters to help with the positioning. Also, all dough made in twin-attachment mixers needs to be completed by hand.

The **Sunbeam Café Series Mixmaster MX8900** and **Mixmaster MX001** score well overall, with the MX8900 scoring better for pizza dough. However, both models jolt when kneading dough and the MX001 bowl is not stable as it doesn't have a bowl lock, while the MX8900 vibrates. Both models have two bowls for smaller and larger quantities, and are generally easy to use.

The **Sunbeam Mixmaster Compact Pro MX5950** also jolts during the dough test and scored only 68% for performance, with a borderline cake mixing score of 50%. On

the upside, the mixer head can be removed and used as a hand mixer, it's cheap and light, has a pulse button and a bowl cover.

The **Breville Wizz Electronic Mixer BEM200C** scores a low 57% overall because of its poor cake mixing and pizza dough results. But using the small mixing bowl for a small cake (for an 18cm-20cm tin) can produce better results; we used the larger bowl for our size recipe. For kneading dough, the manufacturer recommends starting off in the small bowl with beaters and switching to the large bowl with the dough hooks, but we found doing this creates extra mess, and the dough firmly wound itself around the beaters, making it very difficult to detach and switch to the dough hooks. We also found this mixer to be unstable; it vibrates and slides across the bench when in use, and its air vent can blow ingredients onto the mixer, creating extra mess to clean.

86% Kenwood Chef Kitchen Machine KM315A950

86% Kenwood Chef Kitchen Machine KM300

PRICE \$599 / \$449

The difference between these two models is that the KM315A950 comes with a multi-food grinder attachment and stainless steel bowl, while the KM300 comes with a plastic bowl (and no grinder).

GOOD POINTS

- Perfect scores for whisking egg whites and kneading dough.
- Best for ease of use.
- Pulse button.
- Very easy to insert attachments.
- Five-year parts warranty on motor.
- Bowl is dishwasher-safe.
- Comes with a spatula.
- The height of the beaters can be adjusted.
- Control dial is large and very easy to use.
- Spring-loaded motor head so it's very easy to raise and lower.
- Bowl very easy to lock and release.
- Many optional accessories available, such as pasta rollers/cutters, juice extractors and food processor.

BAD POINTS

- No eject button but it's easy to remove attachments.
- No splashguard or pouring shield.
- Motor head jolts slightly when kneading dough.



BEST
BUY

Twin-attachment mixers

82% Sunbeam Mixmaster Series II MX7700

PRICE \$219

GOOD POINTS

- Excellent result for whisking egg whites and kneading dough.
- Comes with a spatula.
- The bowl and attachments are dishwasher-safe.
- Has a large eject button to release attachments.
- Bowl is very easy to lock and release.
- Easy to add ingredients while mixing (but there's no shield so they can splash out if you're not careful).
- The dial knob is very easy to use with clear labelling.
- Has a large release button and lightweight motor head, which is easy to lift and lock into place.

BAD POINTS

- No whisk (twin beaters used for egg white test).
- The twin beaters need to be in the correct position to be inserted, but there's no labelling to show the correct orientation, so it can be fiddly.
- No splashguard or pouring shield.
- Motor head jolts slightly when kneading dough.



BEST
BUY

HOW WE TEST

Performance The following tests are weighted equally to calculate the performance score.

- **Whisking** Our home economists use the whisk(s) to aerate egg whites to form stiff peaks. Where supplied, the wire whisk(s) and smaller whisk is used, if not, the beater(s) is used.
- **Mixing** Using the K-beater or heavy duty beater, they assess how well it combines dry and wet ingredients evenly to produce a smooth, consistent mixture.
- **Kneading** They make pizza dough with the hook attachment to assess the mixer's ability to knead wet and dry ingredients

evenly into a soft ball of dough. This also tests the mixer's power and ability to cope with a heavy load. All mixers except the KitchenAid jolted to varying degrees during this test, indicating just how strenuous it can be to make dough. The single-attachment models coped better than the twin-attachment types.

Ease of use Our testers assess how easy it is to use the controls and read the labelling, lift and lower the head, remove and replace the bowl and mixing tools, add ingredients while the machine is operating, and clean parts and the main unit.





STORY DENIS GALLAGHER

Keep in touch

A cordless landline phone with an answering machine offers freedom at home and peace of mind when away.

such as SMS support, colour displays and volume control may be more important factors to consider when choosing your next landline phone. See the table, below, for which models support the features you need.

Most phone providers, including Optus and Telstra, have a message bank service that effectively provides the same functionality as the answering machines incorporated in the models on test. However, you will be charged extra each month for this service as well as additional charges for features such as selective call acceptance and number diversion. Telstra also has a free

NUTSHELL

>> Some of the phones on test use as much power in standby as when charging the handset.

>> Colour displays, SMS texting and Bluetooth are features available on some of our top-performing phones, but you will pay extra for them.

CHOICE tested 17 of the latest landline phones with answering machines so you can find out which best match your lifestyle. All these phones are charged via a base station that sends the phone signal wirelessly to the handset, allowing you to have a conversation while moving around the house.

While most of these phones perform well overall, there is a significant difference in some key performance areas, including range and time required to recharge the handset. If long-range reception is not an issue, extra features

PRODUCT	PERFORMANCE										FEATURES						
Brand / model (in rank order)	Overall score (%)	Ease of use score (%)	Range score (%)	Sound quality score (%)	Battery life score (%)	Answering machine score (%)	Talk time (hours:minutes)	Standby time (days)	Recharge time (hours:minutes) *	Backlit keypad	Colour display	GAP compatible	Handsets supported	Headset port	Hearing aid compatible	Baby monitor	
Panasonic KX-TG8321AL	85	88	70	87	91	86	19:30	10	4:45	✓	✓	✓	6	✓			
Siemens Gigaset A265	83	79	80	86	89	83	18:30	10	2:45	✓		✓	✓				
Panasonic KX-TG7341AL	82	83	60	87	95	84	21:30	10	3:45	✓			✓	6			
Siemens Gigaset SL375	80	83	90	85	59	84	14:00	6	1:30	✓	✓	✓	6			✓	
Oricom Slim 8800	79	79	80	88	65	89	14:30	7	9:15	✓			✓	5		✓	
Doro Neo Bio 25r	77	76	60	88	81	86	15:00	10	3:15	✓			✓	6	✓	✓	
Telstra Slim 8400a	77	80	80	85	57	88	13:00	6	9:45					5		✓	
Uniden DECT 2035	77	80	40	87	90	91	19:00	10	9:00	✓				6	✓	✓	
Telstra V850a	75	69	70	88	69	89	16:30	7	11:30	✓				5		✓	
Telstra 2400a (A)	74	74	50	86	77	88	13:00	10	12:45					5		✓	
Uniden Elite 9035+1	71	83	30	90	71	83	11:30	9.5	9:45	✓				6	✓	✓	
Uniden WDECT 3355	71	82	40	86	59	91	8:00	8.5	10:30	✓				4	✓	✓	
Telstra 8200a	70	74	30	85	79	88	14:00	10	9:30					5		✓	
Uniden DSS 8955	67	77	30	88	57	87	8:00	8	10:00	✓				10	✓	✓	
Panasonic KX-TG4391AL	65	83	20	88	47	86	8:00	6	3:30	✓				1	✓		
Uniden SSE17+1	64	80	30	86	38	89	6:00	5	9:00	✓				1	✓	✓	
Oricom eco5200	61	69	60	85	15	81	3:30	1.5	7:45				✓	4			

USING THE TABLE Scores The overall score is made up of: Ease of use: 30% Range: 20% Sound quality: 20% Battery life: 20% Answering machine: 10%.

Price Recommended retail, as of May 2009.

WHAT TO BUY

Panasonic KX-TG8321AL	\$150
Siemens Gigaset A265	\$79
Panasonic KX-TG7341AL	\$110
Siemens Gigaset SL375	\$220
Oricom Slim 8800	\$109

message service (Telstra 101) with basic message and retrieval functionality.

While power consumption on cordless phones may not seem significant compared with larger appliances, cordless phones are on throughout the day and night, which may be a consideration for users wanting to limit their power usage. The Siemens Gigaset SL375 and Uniden SSE17+1 consume the least power when the handset is not in the base station, while the Doro Neo Bio 25r consumes the most at 2.6W. The Uniden models are fairly efficient in standby mode, consuming no more than 1W. Most of

the models consume between 1.2W and 1.8W when the fully charged handset is left in the base, while the Siemens Gigaset SL375 uses significantly more power than the rest of the models on test at 3.3W.

Sight and/or hearing impaired option

The Uniden SSE17+1 did not score well in our standby time or range test, although it should be fine for smaller suburban properties. However, it has several unique features designed to appeal to the hearing and/or sight impaired. It has the loudest ringer on both the handset and base of all the phones on test, as well as the loudest maximum handset speaker volume by a significant margin.

A bright red light alerts the user to an incoming call and the large, clearly marked dialling buttons on the corded base station, which has a backlit keypad, make it an ideal design for the sight impaired.

It is also the only model on test that will operate in a power outage – the cordless handset won't operate but the corded base station will receive and make calls. >

If long-range reception is not an issue, extra features such as SMS support, colour displays and volume control are worth considering.

									SPECIFICATIONS			
Phone book (speed dial / menu)	Dialpad and speaker on base unit	Two-way communication between handsets	Base station ringer loudness (dB)	Handset ringer loudness (dB)	Adjustable ringer volume settings (handset / base station)	Maximum speaker volume for handset (dB)	Number of ringtones	Polyphonic ringtones	Can use other rechargeable NiMH batteries	Digital system (GHz)	Contact	Price (\$)
9 / 200			78	73	7 / 1	74	20	15		DECT 1.8	www.panasonic.com.au	150
10 / 40			80	76	6 / 0	72	10			DECT 1.8	www.siemens.com.au	79
0 / 100	✓	✓	83	74	7 / 4	78	15	10	✓	DECT 1.8	www.panasonic.com.au	110
9 / 250		✓		74	6 / 0	73	30	20		DECT 1.8	www.siemens.com.au	220
9 / 100				71	6 / 10	83	10	8	✓	DECT 1.8	www.oricom.com.au	109
0 / 20			76	74	6 / 0	78	10	5	✓	DECT 1.8	www.doro.com.au	90
9 / 200		✓	77	72	6 / 6	78	15	10	✓	DECT 1.8	www.telstra.com.au	120
0 / 70		✓	78	66	4 / 4	84	7	4		DECT 1.8	www.uniden.com.au	80
0 / 50		✓	78	76	5 / 9	76	10		✓	DECT 1.8	www.telstra.com.au	130
0 / 50		✓	76	74	6 / 6	78	10	5		DECT 1.8	www.telstra.com.au	110
0 / 70		✓	82	72	6 / 10	79	10	5		DECT 1.8	www.uniden.com.au	200
10 / 100		✓	82	73	3 / 0	75	20	10		WDECT 2.4	www.uniden.com.au	100
0 / 20		✓	77	76	8 / 6	80	10	5	✓	DECT 1.8	www.telstra.com.au	70
0 / 70	✓	✓	79	72	4 / 4	79	7	4		DSS 5.8	www.uniden.com.au	150
0 / 50			76	74	4 / 3	74	7	4	✓	FHSS 5.8	www.panasonic.com.au	130
10 / 0	✓		90	79	3 / 3	96	2			2.4	www.uniden.com.au	150
0 / 50	✓	✓		78	5 / 8	87	9	5	✓	DECT 1.8	www.oricom.com.au	80

NOTE: All phones in this test come with NiMH rechargeable battery packs except the Siemens Gigaset SL375, which uses Li-ion rechargeable batteries. Times rounded to nearest 15 minutes. (A) Discontinued, but may still be available in some stores.



To get the best deal on a washing machine, call CHOICE Shopper, 1300 360 655, with the model name and number, the price you want to beat and your CHOICE personal subscriber number. The full selection of models in this test may not be available in all states.

Some phones allow you to put the handset in another room and set it to monitor sounds such as a baby crying.

WHAT TO BUY

85% Panasonic KX-TG8321AL

PRICE \$150

GOOD POINTS

- Out-of-range warning.
- Screen saver mode.
- Alarm.
- Colour LCD.
- Headset connection.
- Long standby time.

BAD POINTS

- Loses time setting after a power cut.



82% Panasonic KX-TG7341AL

PRICE \$110

GOOD POINTS

- Keypad on base station allows calls to be made without handset.
- Out-of-range warning.
- Long standby time.
- Longest talk time of models on test.
- Alarm.
- Call privacy.

BAD POINTS

- Loses time setting after a power cut.



83% Siemens Gigaset A265

PRICE \$79

GOOD POINTS

- Second-best range performance.
- Out-of-range warning.
- Alarm.
- Long standby time.

BAD POINTS

- No call waiting.
- No polyphonic ringtones.



80% Siemens Gigaset SL375

PRICE \$220

GOOD POINTS

- Colour display.
- Bluetooth.
- SMS compatible.
- Out-of-range warning.
- Separate base station and charger.
- Alarm clock and calendar.
- Two-way communication without the base.
- Best call range of models on test.

BAD POINTS

- No headset port (only Bluetooth as an option).
- Not able to access messages from base.
- No indication on base that there is a message.



HOW WE TEST

Ease of use Our testers consider the quality of the instruction manual, feel and comfort of the handset, whether the screen is easy to read and any other special features.

Sound quality A panel of users makes calls in a moderately noisy environment and assesses speech clarity, speech loudness, line noise and background noise reduction.

Battery life After fully charging each phone's battery, our testers set the phones to talk and standby, and time how long each setting lasts. They also time how long the phones take to recharge.

Range For each phone, our tester uses a wall of uniform concrete con-

struction obstructing the line of site to the base station. The base station is placed within a warehouse building with solid concrete foundations and walls, while the handset is located outside on the opposite side of the wall. Maximum range is determined either by when the radio link is cut or a subjective assessment of when the degradation of voice quality makes conversation unacceptable. This is a very harsh test.

Answering machine Our testers look at the ease of use when creating a message and managing calls, as well as sound clarity and quality for both the message recording and the message left by the caller.

79% Oricom Slim 8800

PRICE \$109

GOOD POINTS

- Out-of-range warning.
- Baby monitor.
- Alarm.
- Clear display screen.
- Has call barring to prevent certain numbers being dialled.

BAD POINTS

- Not as comfortable to hold compared with other models on test.



ABOUT THE REST

The **Doro** is a good overall performer, inexpensive and offers some useful features including a headset port for hands-free operation.

The **Telstra Slim 8400a** supports SMS texting and includes a wireless headset, effectively providing two calling options.

The answering machines on the **Uniden** models are very good to excellent, with the **Elite 9035+1** returning the best overall sound quality of the phones on test and the **DECT 2035** representing good overall value as well as delivering

one of the best battery performances for both talk time and standby.

The **Uniden WDECT 3355** uses the 2.4GHz band (which could be an issue if you have a wireless network at home) while the **DSS 8955** uses 5.8GHz, and both models perform adequately but are let down by only average talk and standby times. Both also allow you to use the keypad on the base station to make calls without using the handset.

The **Telstra V850a** and **2400a** perform well across the board and, although the

2400a supports SMS, it is the only phone on test not to have a hands-free feature.

The **Telstra 8200a** is a good-value option as it's one of the cheapest models on test.

The **Panasonic KX-TG4391AL** is very easy to use, with very good sound and the ability to dial from the base station, but has the worst range of the phones on test.

The **Oricom eco5200** is able to dial out from the base station, but scored poorly for battery performance.

For more on the **Uniden SSE17+1**, see page 53.

WHAT TO LOOK FOR

Large, clearly marked keys and a **backlit keypad** can help when making calls in low light.

A colour display screen can be useful to read favourite contacts.

Handset supported This shows how many extra handsets of the same model can be used.

Generic Access Profile (GAP) If a model supports this, you can use another GAP handset from any other manufacturer simply by plugging the handset into a power point. However, GAP compliance extends only to basic operations, which

means added features such as phonebooks may not work, so it's generally better to think about the number of handsets you might need now and in the near future when you make your initial purchase.

Headset port This can be handy if you don't want to hold the phone to your ear during a long conversation or you want to take notes while talking.

Baby monitor Some models allow you to put the handset in another room and set it to monitor sounds such as a baby crying.

Call waiting lets you know when someone is trying to call you while you are talking to someone else. Users have the option to take the call or allow the phone to automatically take a message while you continue the first call.

Phone book allows you to store your contact numbers and dial the number by selecting the contact.

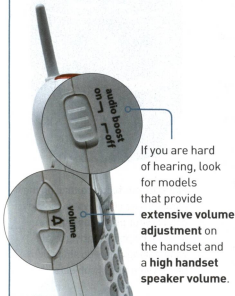
Batteries While all cordless phones should come with rechargeable batteries, some models can use other AAA NiMH rechargeable batteries which are less expensive and more readily available than battery packs.

Telecoil One that can couple with the telecoil in a hearing aid is a useful feature; however, it is not widely available.



The **ability to page** from the base to the handset can be handy, particularly if you leave the phone lying around the house. All the models on test have this ability. Alternatively, look for a model that has a **dial pad and speaker on the base unit**, so you can also make calls from there.

Digital system [GHz] Phones marked as DECT (Digitally Enhanced Cordless Technology) run on the 1.8GHz-1.9GHz band, which no other appliances use. This may be important to consider if your house is full of wireless gadgets or you use a wireless network operating on the 2.4GHz band. Other bands such as DSS (Digital Spread Spectrum) and FHSS (Frequency Hopping Spread Spectrum) search for the best possible frequency within a band if interference is detected.



If you are hard of hearing, look for models that provide **extensive volume adjustment** on the handset and a **high handset speaker volume**.



STORY DENIS GALLAGHER

Zooming on out

A digital camera zoom lens can take your photography to greater lengths.

While Nikon and Canon dominate DSLR sales, a new all-digital lens system developed by a range of manufacturers and currently used in Olympus and Panasonic cameras is making a big impact. Known as the Four Thirds system, it is designed for digital photography and so does not have to cater for older, film-based cameras. Our testing shows these new lenses more than hold their own against the other >

NUTSHELL

>>The camera body determines the lens mount you must use.
>>The recently introduced Four Thirds mounting system has a slew of high-quality lenses to compete with the best that established camera makers can offer.

If you own a digital SLR camera (DSLR) and want to expand your photographic horizons, the next step is to decide on the best zoom lens to complete your kit. CHOICE put 20 DSLR standard and telezoom lenses to the test to see how easy they are to use and how well they perform. Our results show some are better than others at dealing with difficult photo-taking situations.

WHAT TO LOOK FOR

Lens mount This is critical as it determines what camera you can use or which you should buy. Look in the table (page 58) to see which lens will suit your camera. While lenses from camera manufacturers will only support their make of camera, others such as Tokina and Tamron support a large range of mounts and camera makes. Panasonic and Olympus lenses are interchangeable because they share the recently introduced Four Thirds mount. Also take note of the Canon and Nikon mounts, as the letters show whether it is for an APS-C (consumer) or full frame sensor (professional) camera.

The closest distance to focus is generally closer for standard zoom lenses than larger telephoto models and is the measure, in millimetres, that the camera can focus in macro mode (or normal mode if there's no macro).

Equivalent on 35mm camera This figure indicates the zoom range (mm) when used on a full-frame DSLR or 35mm film SLR.

Can be used on a full-frame camera

Most of these lenses are produced specifically for consumer DSLR cameras and can't be used on professional full-frame sensor DSLRs.

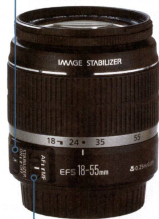
A lens hood is useful when you need to keep out extraneous light, particularly when you are using a telephoto zoom lens.

Lens thread diameter Check this when looking for a new lens, as any filter you use must have the same size. You can use a converter ring that will allow you to use a different size filter; however, this could leave you susceptible to mechanical vignetting (see How We Test, page 58).

A fast aperture will allow you to take more effective photos, even when the available light becomes limited. The lower the aperture number (such as f2.8), the more light is let through to the digital photo sensor, allowing you to use a faster shutter speed. However, low aperture settings also reduce the depth of field which can be an issue if you want most of your image to be in sharp focus.

Optical image stabilisation

corrects for small movements made while taking a photo and can allow sharp photos to be taken at slower shutter speeds.



Manual/autofocus control on the camera lens allows you to quickly control your photo composition and can be particularly useful when taking close-up shots or photos with lots of subjects.

WHAT TO BUY

STANDARD ZOOM

81% Panasonic 14-45mm f/3.5-5.6

PRICE Supplied with Panasonic G1 camera only

GOOD POINTS

- Compact and light.
- Very low distortion.
- Extremely easy to use.
- Optical image stabilisation.

BAD POINTS

- Closest focusing distance is the farthest of recommended standard models.

**77%** Olympus Zuiko Digital 14-54mm f/2.8-3.5 II

PRICE \$719

GOOD POINTS

- Very close macro focus.
- Very low distortion.
- Extremely easy to use.

BAD POINTS

- Poor veiling glare performance.

**72%** Tamron SP AF 17-50mm f/2.8 XR Di II

PRICE \$899

GOOD POINTS

- Constant aperture throughout zoom range.
- Support for several makes of camera.

BAD POINTS

- Some vignetting.

**72%** Nikon AF-S DX-Nikkor 18-55mm f/3.5-5.6 G VR

PRICE Supplied with Nikon cameras only

GOOD POINTS

- Best veiling glare score of all models on test.
- Optical image stabilisation.

BAD POINTS

- Some vignetting.

**72%** Olympus Zuiko Digital 14-42mm f/3.5-5.6

PRICE \$399

GOOD POINTS

- Compact and light.
- Best modulation transfer score on test.

BAD POINTS

- Can be affected by extraneous light.



TELEZOOM

76% Pentax smc DA 50-200mm f/4-5.6 ED

PRICE \$349

GOOD POINTS

- Extremely low distortion.
- Extremely easy to use.

BAD POINTS

- Some vignetting.
- Closest focusing distance is the farthest of recommended telezoom models.

**73%** Panasonic Lumix G Vario 45-200mm f/4-5.6

PRICE \$879

GOOD POINTS

- Optical image stabilisation.
- Extremely low distortion.
- Extremely easy to use.

BAD POINTS

- Some vignetting.



ABOUT THE REST

STANDARD ZOOM

The **Pentax** smc-DA 18-55mm f/3.5-5.6 AL scored only OK when dealing with extraneous light and macro work, while the **Nikon** AF-S DX 18-105mm G-ED VR exhibited some vignetting.

The **Canon** delivers the average result you might expect with a kit lens, while the **Tokina** and **Sigma** models returned surprisingly poor results given their high price tags, and they have problems dealing with extraneous light.

TELEZOOM

Reflection within the lens is an issue with several of the telezoom models on test, with both **Tamrons** and the **Canon** EF-S 55-250mm f/4-5.6 IS models returning borderline results and the **Sigma** a poor one.

The **Olympus** provides good performance for most aspects.

The **Nikon** is OK but its modulation transfer function result is borderline and it also has some vignetting issues.

The **Canon** EF-S 18-200mm, **Tamron** 18-270mm and **Sony** SAL 18250 DT all provide an impressive single lens solution, with the **Canon** the pick of the wide-angle to telezoom lenses. However, packing so much into one lens may explain the relatively poor performance.

HOW WE TEST

Modulation transfer function Measuring this is the best available indicator of a lens' ability to replicate detail in a photographic image with appropriate contrast and sharpness.

Ease of use Our testers evaluate how easy it is to operate the zoom lens, change settings such as image stabilisation and aperture, and understand the instruction manual.

Distortion This measures the ability of the lens to accurately reproduce the edge of an image, particularly when the zoom lens is at its widest setting. Distortion is usually evident when looking at an image with sharply defined lines such as the edge of a building. Barrel distortion is apparent when the image looks like it has the profile of a barrel, while pincushion distortion is evident when an image appears concave or the four edges of the image are squeezed.

Reflections within lens This test measures the effect of extraneous light on the lens' ability to faithfully reproduce an image. Unwanted light reflections within the lens lead to issues such as lens flare and spots of light on a photo. A lens hood should help reduce this problem.

Veiling glare This measures the amount of stray light in a lens caused by reflections of light between the surface of the lens element and the inside of the barrel of the lens. A lens that performs poorly will often show up as producing images with a washed-out look over most of the photo. This is often not as noticeable as other types of glare that may leave a distinctive light spot on an image. Veiling glare can result in a reduction in the contrast of the image as well as the colour saturation.

Vignetting measures the extent of darkening at the edge of an image compared with the overall image. This is often evident in close-up shots using a lens at its widest aperture (f/2.8 or f/1.8) where dark corners appear on the image. This phenomenon is not to be confused with mechanical vignetting, which happens when using a wide angle lens and a hood or multiple filters that may intrude into the field of view. This produces a similar dark corner but can be fixed by removing either the filter or hood.

Macro This test determines the ability to faithfully shoot images at a ratio approaching 1:1, with testers making an assessment of a close-up image shot at maximum and medium aperture.



Distortion



Reflections within lens



Veiling glare



Vignetting

models on test, with several Four Thirds mount lenses among our What to Buy recommendations (page 57).

Existing DSLR owners should take note of the "lens mount" column in the table to find models that will suit their particular camera body. Companies such as Tamron, Sigma and Tokina provide models with a mount to suit your camera, however the mount cannot be changed to suit another make later.

PRODUCT		PERFORMANCE	
Brand / model (in rank order)		Overall score (%)	Modulation transfer function score (%)
STANDARD ZOOM			
Panasonic Lumix G Vario 14-45mm f/3.5-5.6	81	81	91
Olympus Zuiko Digital 14-54mm f/2.8-3.5 II	77	77	91
Tamron SP AF 17-50mm f/2.8 XR Di II	72	70	75
Nikon AF-S DX-Nikkor 18-55mm f/3.5-5.6G VR	72	62	80
Olympus Zuiko Digital 14-42mm f/3.5-5.6	72	88	73
Pentax smc DA-L 18-55mm f/3.5-5.6 AL	69	66	78
Nikon AF-S DX 18-105mm G-ED VR	67	69	63
Canon EF-S 18-55mm f/3.5-5.6 IS	67	56	75
Tokina AT-X 16-50mm f/2.8 Pro DX	64	69	63
Sigma 18-50mm f/2.8 EX DC Macro	64	55	75
TELEZOOM			
Pentax smc DA 50-200mm f/4-5.6 ED	76	66	85
Panasonic Lumix G Vario 45-200mm f/4-5.6	73	65	90
Tamron AF 55-200mm f/4-5.6 Di II Macro	70	67	63
Olympus Zuiko Digital 40-150mm f/4-5.6	70	58	80
Canon EF-S 55-250mm f/4-5.6 IS	69	62	70
Nikon AF-S 55-200mm f/4-5.6 G IF-ED VR DX	68	54	70
Canon EF-S 18-200mm f/3.5-5.6 IS	66	70	53
Sigma 55-200mm f/4-5.6 DC	65	57	70
Tamron 18-270mm f/3.5-6.3 VC Di II	57	54	53
Sony SAL 18250 DT 18-250mm f/3.5-6.3	57	60	45

USING THE TABLE Scores The overall score is made up of: Modulation transfer function; when used on full frame sensor camera. (B) Supplied with Panasonic G1 camera only. (C)

If you're used to using a zoom lens on a film SLR camera, don't expect the same true zoom capability on a digital zoom lens. The 35mm equivalent zoom range column in the table shows the range the lens will capture if you were using a 35mm film-based camera. Except for full-frame sensor DSLR cameras, which cost several thousand dollars, most DSLRs simply crop the image (reducing the number of pixels) to fit the camera sensor. Canon

and Nikon consumer DSLRs use an APS-C sensor where the zoom figure on the lens is multiplied by 1.6 or 1.5 to get an equivalent figure on a full-frame camera, while zoom figures on a lens for the Four Thirds system should be doubled to indicate the equivalent range. Although your zoomed image will be larger at a distance (a 200mm becomes a 320mm), your wide-angle will not be as wide as it would when used on a camera with a full-frame sensor. ■

					FEATURES			SPECIFICATIONS																									
Reflections within lens score (%)					Veiling glare score (%)			Vignetting score (%)			Macro score (%)			Image stabilisation in lens			Can be used with full-frame sensor camera			Lens hood included	Lens mount	Closest distance to focus (mm)	Zoom range (35mm equivalent)	Maximum aperture at minimum focal length	Maximum aperture at maximum focal length	Minimum length (mm)		Maximum length (mm)		Weight (g)	Lens thread diameter (mm)	Contact	Price (\$)
3	95	54	81	75	✓			✓	Micro Four Thirds						300	28 - 90	3.5	5.6	60	90	195	52	panasonic.com.au	(B)									
11	85	42	76	65				✓	Four Thirds						220	28 - 108	2.8	3.5	89	113	440	67	olympus.com.au	719									
5	87	65	63	65				✓	Sony/Minolta, Canon EF, Nikon F, Pentax						270	26 - 78	2.8	2.8	92	120	434	67	maxwell.com.au	899									
17	84	90	64	70	✓	✓ (A)			Nikon F						280	27 - 83	3.5	5.6	82	92	265	52	nikon.com.au	(C)									
3	34	56	74	65				✓	Four Thirds						250	28 - 84	3.5	5.6	68	96	190	58	olympus.com.au	399									
3	69	62	66	55					Pentax KA						250	27 - 83	3.5	5.6	68	79	225	52	pentax.com.au	349									
6	86	88	58	65	✓	✓ (A)	✓		Nikon F						450	27 - 158	3.5	5.6	89	135	449	67	nikon.com.au	669									
9	79	63	63	80	✓				Canon EF-S						280	29 - 88	3.5	5.6	70	85	190	58	canon.com.au	399									
0	51	47	53	55		✓ (A)	✓		Canon EF, Nikon F						300	24 - 75	2.8	2.8	100	144	610	77	adeal.com.au	1699									
7	68	53	60	45				✓	Canon EF-S, Nikon F, Sony/Minolta, Pentax KA, Four Thirds, Sigma						200	27 - 80	2.8	2.8	91	117	450	72	crkennedy.com.au	899									
0	82	79	65	55					Pentax KA						1100	77 - 306	4	5.6	78	130	255	52	pentax.com.au	349									
6	58	57	62	65	✓			✓	Micro Four Thirds						1000	90 - 400	4	5.6	100	136	399	52	panasonic.com.au	879									
0	51	88	77	55				✓	Sony/Minolta, Canon EF, Nikon F						490	88 - 320	4	5.6	86	137	300	52	maxwell.com.au	249									
6	76	50	84	55				✓	Four Thirds						900	80 - 300	4	5.6	72	130	220	58	olympus.com.au	499									
3	48	83	61	65	✓				Canon EF-S						1100	88 - 400	4	5.6	109	168	390	58	canon.com.au	449									
2	71	84	54	65	✓	✓ (A)	✓		Nikon F						1100	83 - 300	4	5.6	100	135	335	52	nikon.com.au	449									
9	92	84	56	70	✓				Canon EF-S						450	29 - 320	3.5	5.6	102	163	595	72	canon.com.au	1199									
2	37	58	73	65		✓		✓	Canon, Nikon, Sigma						1100	88 - 320	4	5.6	88	131	310	55	crkennedy.com.au	399									
0	78	66	68	50	✓				Canon EF, Nikon F						490	28 - 419	3.5	6.3	104	193	550	72	maxwell.com.au	1299									
8	69	64	63	60				✓	Sony/Minolta						450	27 - 375	3.5	6.3	87	165	470	62	sony.com.au	1199									

% Ease of use: 20% Distortion: 10% Reflections within lens: 10% Veiling glare: 10% Vignetting: 10% Macro: 5% **Price** Recommended retail, as of May 2009. **TABLE NOTES** (A) Will experience cropping of the image if used on a kit lens.



STORY MATTHEW STEEN

Blowing away the jargon

Do advancements in hair dryer technology really make much of a difference to your hair? CHOICE trialists find out.

NUTSHELL

>> Our trial shows new technologies such as ceramic and ionic don't make much difference to the way your hair feels and looks after drying. >> You don't have to spend a lot of money for a good hair dryer.

Is all the hype about new technologies in hair dryers just that, or does ionic technology really make a difference to the way your hair feels?

Will a ceramic heating element infused with tourmaline make your hair dry faster or look better? Do you really need to shell out more for expensive models just to make your hair feel smoother?

CHOICE conducted a user trial of 14 new hair dryers to find out whether price or new technological features make any difference to the speed of drying your hair. We also collected trialists' comments on what >



ECO-FRIENDLY HAIR DRYING

If you find yourself rapidly going through hair dryers, you may wish to consider the VS Sassoon Eco Dry styler (released too late to include in this trial), which claims to use half the normal energy of a 2000W hair dryer – saving enough energy each day to make several cups of tea. Its other claim of using less plastic and packaging is a good start to making a sustainable dryer.

PRODUCT	PERFORMANCE								FEATURES	
Brand / model (in rank order)	Overall rating (%)	Speed of drying hair (%)*	Handle comfort (%)	Ease of manoeuvring (%)	Balance of hair dryer (%)	Cord placement (%)	Ease of reading settings (%)	Ease of changing settings (%)	Diffuser/volumiser	Ionic technology
Joh Bailey JBPD3600	80	90	60	70	60	80	75	70	✓	✓
Philips TRESemmé HP4880-07	80	80	85	70	80	85	85	80		
Wahl Supadryer	80	80	80	80	70	85	90	95	✓	✓ (B)
Philips TRESemmé HP4891-17	75	80	60	60	50	80	85	70	✓	✓ (B)
Remington Salon Collection AC3000	75	80	55	65	60	60	90	90	✓	✓
Sunbeam HD7850P	75	70	70	80	70	70	90	90	✓	✓
Sunbeam HD8400 Nutrihair Dryer	75	75	75	80	65	70	65	65	✓	
VS Sassoon VSP6619A	75	80	55	70	60	75	85	75		✓
Joh Bailey JBD87	70	65	65	75	75	75	80	60	✓	
Remington Big Shot Pro Pack BS2000G	70	60	70	75	75	85	85	80	✓	
VS Sassoon VSH225A	70	65	75	90	85	80	65	70		
Breville BHD400 (A)	65	50	75	85	80	80	90	80		
Twin Turbo Compact 3200	65	70	55	65	50	85	35	70		✓
Maxim 9808 PowerMax (A)	60	50	60	75	60	90	70	70	✓	

USING THE TABLE Scores The overall rating is made up of: Speed of drying hair: 50% Handle comfort: 8.33% Ease of manoeuvring: 8.33% Balance of hair dryer: 8.33% Cord placement: 8.33% Ease of reading settings: 8.33% Ease of changing settings: 8.33% **Diffuser / ionic / ceramic** See Jargon Buster, page 62, for more details. **Price** Recommended retail, as of June 2009. **TABLE NOTES** * On the highest speed setting. ** Includes cord, but excludes all extras that come with the dryers. (A) Discontinued, but may still be available in stores.

WHAT TO BUY



80% Joh Bailey
JBPD3600



80% Philips
TRESemmé
HP4880-07

BEST
BUY



80% Wahl
Supadryer

PRICE \$100

TRIALIST COMMENTS

- "Felt a little heavy, but well balanced so my arm did not ache at the end of use."
- "Cool-shot was excellent, worked fast and well."
- "The concentrator worked extremely well."
- "The settings were easy to understand and gave a good range."
- "Really like the speed settings on this one."

PRICE \$40

TRIALIST COMMENTS

- "This hair dryer was nice and light so my arm didn't feel tired holding it for long periods."
- "It had all the settings required for good performance."
- "Ideal, does not burn you on the high setting and not too cool on the low one."
- "This is my favourite one so far. It styles my hair better than my own dryer, quickly and effectively. I also like the clear description in the manual."

PRICE \$80

TRIALIST COMMENTS

- "Brilliant settings – very easy to understand."
- "I love that you can switch the dryer onto cool without having to keep your finger on the cool-shot button."
- "The concentrator is very slim, so works well."
- "I did not notice any difference with or without the ionic button."

SPECIFICATIONS				
technology	Claimed wattage	Weight (g)**	Contact	Price (\$)
	2000	897	www.johbailey.com.au	100
	2000	644	www.breville.com.au	40
	1800	753	www.unityagencies.com.au	80
	2000	713	www.breville.com.au	50
	2000	742	www.remington-products.com.au	64
	1800	511	www.sunbeam.com.au	50
	2000	608	www.sunbeam.com.au	80
	2000	773	www.vssassoon.com.au	100
	2000	497	www.johbailey.com.au	30
	2000	590	www.remington-products.com.au	39
	2000	474	www.vssassoon.com.au	30
	2000	549	www.breville.com.au	35
	1900	824	www.muimports.com.au	150
	1850	519	www.maximhousewares.com	25

Has a switch to turn on the ioniser feature. Due to the small number of trialists rating in product, scores have been rounded to the nearest 5% and no statistical analysis has been conducted.

ABOUT THE REST

While the **Philips TRESemmé HP4891-17** has a very good drying score, it is let down by its balance.

The **Remington Salon Collection AC3000, Twin Turbo** and **VS Sassoon VSP6619A** scored only 55% for handle comfort, and the latter model is also the most expensive on trial.

Both **Sunbeam** models have the same overall score, but the **HD7850P** is easier to use than the **HD8400 Nutrihair Dryer**.

Both the **Joh Bailey JBD87** and the **Twin Turbo** come with two concentrators of different sizes. The **Twin Turbo** also broke during our drop test, yet ironically is the only model that claims to have an unbreakable body.

The **Remington Big Shot Pro Pack BS2000G**, while easy to use, scored only 60% for speed of drying hair.

The **VS Sassoon VSH225A** is the lightest model on trial.

The **Breville BHD400** and **Maxim** scored only 50% for speed of drying hair.

Neither ceramic nor ionic technology noticeably improves these dryers' overall scores.

JARGON BUSTER

Tourmaline This claims to emit negative ions that are supposed to improve the look of hair.

Ionic A technology producing negatively charged ions that are claimed to dry hair faster, as well as decrease static, thus promoting healthier, smoother hair.

Ceramic Contains a ceramic coil, which supposedly heats more

evenly and effectively than the traditional heating element.

Concentrator This narrows and concentrates the airflow to where you want it. It's designed for spot-drying and controlled styling.

Cool-shot Claims to be good for setting a style in place.

Diffuser/volumiser Diffusers with short fingers are designed

to dry curly or permed hair by spreading the airflow to prevent frizz. Diffusers with longer fingers – sometimes called volumisers – are designed to add volume to all types of hair by directing heat to the roots.

Turbo (shot/boost) Increases airflow through the hair dryer to speed up drying.

improvements to the look and feel of their hair they experienced after using the dryers. It may be tempting to assume power equals performance; however this test confirmed power isn't an indication of a hair dryer's performance – just as in our last test in 2001.

We also tested each dryer's noise level, with all measuring between 84dBA and 90dBA, equivalent to the sound of a busy street.

Faster and silkier?

CHOICE trialled a mixture of conventional, ionic and ceramic (see Jargon Buster, above) dryers, and while the equal top-rating product, Joh Bailey JBPD3600, uses both technologies, only one of the other top-scoring models has ionic technology. And the Philips TRESemmè HP4880-07 doesn't have ceramic technology.

Of the eight hair dryers that scored 75% or more overall, half are ceramic hair dryers and half have regular heating elements. Ionic technology is supposed to dry hair faster as well as make hair feel better, and although all the ionic hair dryers have good to excellent hair-drying scores, others without the technology also scored well.

From our trial, we can see little evidence of either technology having a definite impact on performance compared with hair dryers that use conventional technology. Trialists' comments indicate the Sunbeam HD8400 Nutrihair Dryer, a hair dryer without either new technology, is more likely to leave hair feeling silky, healthy and smooth. It comes with capsules that are loaded into the dryer and essentially condition the hair. While trialist comments indicate these seem to work, they will cost you an additional \$30 ongoing for a pack of eight. Each capsule only lasts one use.

Interestingly, whether the hair dryer was ionic or non-ionic did not appear to make a difference to how hair looked or felt, and the different technologies don't have a consistent impact on price. ■

HOW WE TEST

Trialists Twenty-three female trialists recruited from CHOICE staff, family and friends trialled the 14 hair dryers. Each person used 10 of the 14 hair dryers for two to three days, allowing trialists to use each dryer a few times before rating the product.

Hair dryers We select all widely available models on the market at the time of our trial.

Drop test Each dryer is dropped from a height of one metre and any damage is assessed. The housing of the Twin Turbo came apart in this test.

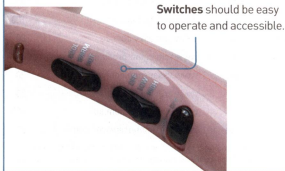
WHAT TO LOOK FOR

Manoeuvrability, size and weight are important, so pick up hair dryers in the shop to see if they're comfortable to hold and well balanced.

All the dryers trialled have two or more **heat and airflow settings**. If you want one that allows you to select settings independently, you need separate settings for heat and air speed.

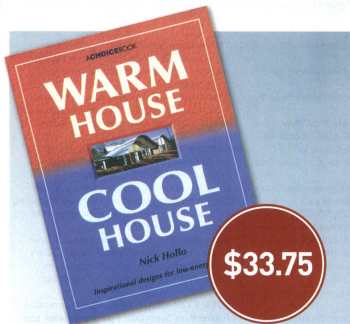
A cool-shot gives a burst of cool air and claims to be good for setting a style in place. All the hair dryers in this trial come with this feature.

All the hair dryers on trial have a **hook**, allowing you to hang it on the wall and away from wet bathroom surfaces.



To get the best deal on a washing machine, call CHOICE Shopper, 1300 360 655, with the model name and number, the price you want to beat and your CHOICE personal subscriber number. The full selection of models in this test may not be available in all states.

CHOICE Books



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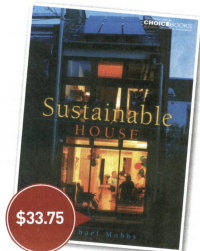
OUR HOME

A beautiful – and
useful – book for
recording details
of your renovations,
finances and
decorations.



SUSTAINABLE HOUSE

Learn how to
create an almost
entirely self-
sufficient house.



RECALLS & BANS

There are so many product recalls we may not be able to print all of them. For comprehensive recall information go to the Product Recalls Australia website: www.recalls.gov.au, or call the ACCC's Product Safety Policy section on 02 6243 1262. Companies often rent 1800 numbers for a couple of months after a recall is announced. If the number given is no longer operating, phone the manufacturer or retailer.

BABY DUMMY PJ Sas Trading has recalled **Baby Joy 2 Pack Orthodontic Pacifiers Soft Natural Latex**, item number 58655, sold at retail outlets between January 2007 and May 2009.

The problem The size of the shield doesn't meet the requirements of the Australian standard for babies' dummies, and may pose a choking hazard.

What to do Don't use them. Return them to the place of purchase for a refund, or for more information call 02 9602 5444.

BABY DUMMY Cut Price Imports has recalled **Baby Pacifier 2 Pack**, item number KIT4504, sold at retail outlets between June 2004 and June 2009.

The problem The size of the shield may block the airways of a young child, while the teat and ring can also detach and cause a choking hazard.

What to do Don't use them. Return them to the place of purchase for a refund, or for more information call 08 9470 9322.

HEATER Climate Technologies has recalled **PyroxVulcan Bluebon space heater**, models 4804BN, 4804SB, 4808BN, 4808SB, serial number range 00706981 to 00794271.

The problem In rare cases, incorrect burner assembly may cause unacceptable carbon monoxide emission levels.

What to do Stop using it. Call 03 8795 2462 or log your details at www.heritagerecall.com.au to arrange for an inspection and free repair where necessary.

TRAVEL ADAPTER Travelgoods.com has recalled **Diplomat World Travel Adapter**, model TDA02, a three-part travel adapter for overseas travel, sold in Target stores between September 2008 and June 2009.

The problem The plugs intended for use in the US can be rotated to fit an Australian socket. These plugs aren't insulated. It's also possible to connect two of the components together and insert them into a live socket with a live pin overhanging. These defects could result in electric shock, death or property damage.

What to do Don't use it under any circumstance. Return it to any Target store for a refund.

COFFEE GRINDER Starbucks Australia has recalled **Starbucks Barista Blade Grinder**, SKU numbers 162640 (black) and 173572 (stainless steel), available for sale in Starbucks Australia stores between October 2004 and March 2009.

The problem The grinder can fail to turn off, or turn on unexpectedly, posing risk of injury.

What to do Stop using it. Return it to any Starbucks store for a refund or store credit, or for more information call 02 8977 8500.

FOOD Smith's Snackfood Company has recalled **Smith's Classic Crinkle Cut Potato Chips**, chicken and salt and vinegar flavour in the following products:

1. Chicken [45g/90g/175g/200g], best before 09 Jul 09, lot code "GE"
2. Salt and Vinegar [90g/200g], best before 09 Jul 09, lot code "GE"
3. Salt and Vinegar Box 15 pack, best before 09 Jul 09, lot code "GE"
4. Variety Box 20 pack, best before 09 Jul 09, lot codes "GF" and "GG", best before 16 Jul 09, lot code "GA"
5. Kidz Pick Box 20 pack, best before 09 Jul 09 lot codes "GE" and "GF", best before 16 Jul 09, lot code "GA"

WA, SA, NT, VIC and TAS - Salt & Vinegar Box 15 pack, Variety Box 20 pack, Kidz Pick Box 20 pack
NSW, QLD and ACT - Chicken [45g/90g/175g/200g], Salt & Vinegar [90g/200g], Salt & Vinegar Box 15 pack, Variety Box 20 pack, Kidz Pick Box 20 pack.

They were sold between April and May 2009 at Coles, Woolworths, Metcash, schools, corner stores, route trade and vending machines.

The problem They may contain rubber pieces that could pose a choking hazard.

What to do Don't eat them. Return them to the place of purchase for a refund.

FOOD Regal Cream Products has recalled **Bula Creamy Classics, Cookies & Cream Ice-Cream**, two-litre plastic tub, best before 06/10/2010, product number 9310161001480, sold at Coles, Woolworths/Safeway and Metcash stores.

The problem It may contain plastic pieces that could pose a choking hazard.

What to do Return it to the place of purchase for a refund.

FOOD Campbell's Soups Australia has recalled **Campbell's Country Ladle Potato and Leek Soup**, 505g can, batch code 3T9PAL, product number 9300644235716, sold in Coles, Woolworths/Safeway, Metcash, Foodland, Foodworks and wholesalers in Tasmania.

The problem It may contain rubber pieces.

What to do Don't eat it. Return it to the place of purchase for a refund, or for more information call 1800 33 22 37, or write to Consumer Affairs, Locked Bag 55, Reply Paid 7705, Silverwater, 2128.

FOOD Cadbury has recalled **Cadbury Old Gold Dark Chocolate**, 70% Cocoa, 200g block, all best before dates up to and including 7/06/2010. It was sold in Coles, Woolworths/Safeway, Metcash, Franklins, Big W, route trade, vending machines, schools and service stations.

The problem A possible allergen in milk solids isn't declared in the ingredient list.

What to do Don't eat it if you have a milk allergy or intolerance. For more information, or to organise a refund, call 1800 250 260.

BABY QUILT Bed Bath N' Table has recalled **Morgan & Finch Baby Quilt/Flower Hearts**, item code 11985910, sold between 16 February 2009 and 20 May 2009.

The problem The hand-stitching of the rosette flower heads is insufficient and they may detach, posing a possible choking hazard to babies or young children.

What to do Return it to your nearest Bed Bath N' Table store for a refund, or for more information call 03 9387 3322 between 9am and 5pm weekdays.

BABY RATTLE Target Australia has recalled **Jungle Friends Bead Rattle**, sold in Target stores between 5 February 2009 and 7 May 2009. It was available in either a green lion or a blue elephant.

The problem The plastic ring may separate, causing the beads to fall out and pose a choking hazard to babies and young children.

What to do Remove it from the reach of children. Return it to your nearest Target or Target Country store for a refund, or for more information call 1800 814 788 between 9am and 5pm weekdays.

BOYS' PYJAMA SET Best & Less has recalled **Toddler Boys' Super Dude 3 piece pyjama set**, sizes 3-6, which included a long sleeve top, detachable cape and long pants. It has SKU number 1413-57 on the reverse of the brand/care label, and was for sale for \$17.99 at Best & Less stores between March 2009 and 25 May 2009.

The problem The fire warning label hasn't been attached to all three pieces of clothing as required by the Australian standard.

What to do Return it to your nearest Best & Less store for a refund, or for more information call 1800 760 580.

LAWN MOWER Husqvarna Australia has recalled **Talon Lawn Mowers**, model AM3085 with serial numbers beginning with 0807, and model AM3080 with serial numbers beginning with 0809. The serial number can be found on the lower left side of the catcher door label. They've been for sale in a variety of stores since August 2008.

The problem The head of the blade securing bolt may fail, allowing the blade to dislodge.

What to do Don't use it. Call 1300 804 213 to be directed to your nearest authorised repair agent to have the blade and bolt set replaced free of charge.

SUNGLASSES Myer has recalled **Miss Shop Sunglasses** in the following styles: Sloane, "lort" colour, sold since February 2008; Cyrus, cherry colour, sold since February 2009; and Julianne, cherry colour and sold since February 2009.

The problem The colour variance between the left and right lenses of some of the sunglasses may not meet the requirements of the Australian standard for sunglasses and fashion spectacles.

What to do Stop using them. Return them to your nearest Myer store for a refund, call 1800 811 611 between 9am and 5pm for more information, or go to www.myer.com.au.

WARRANTIES

Extending your warranty rights

Consumer warranties come under the government spotlight.

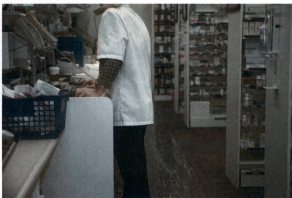
CHOICE welcomes the current review of conditions and warranties by the Commonwealth Consumer Affairs Advisory Council. The review will examine the adequacy of existing federal, state and territory laws on conditions and warranties implied into contracts for goods and services.

We've identified several key issues that need to be addressed in the review.

- Consumers' poor understanding of their statutory warranty rights, which can result in them purchasing extended warranties in situations where the statutory warranty would suffice.
- Consumers feeling pressured to buy extended warranties when they purchase products.
- Consumer warranty complaints not being resolved due to retailers denying their responsibilities.
- Inconsistent warranty coverage because of different laws across Australia.
- The value of warranties when a business becomes insolvent.

To address these problems, CHOICE is calling for the following reforms.

- Improved warranty protection information be available to consumers at the point of sale. This information should clearly explain key statutory warranty protections and their relationship to manufacturer or extended warranties.
- All extended warranty brochures to communicate key consumer statutory protections, along with terms and conditions of the warranty being offered.
- The regulator to provide warranty protection information directly to traders, explaining their warranty responsibilities.
- Authorities to take action against businesses that fail to honour consumer warranty rights.
- Consumers be given the option to purchase extended warranties within 30 days of purchasing original goods.
- Harmonisation of consumer warranty protection under the new Australian consumer law.
- Laws to protect consumer warranty rights when warranties are purchased from a business that subsequently becomes insolvent.



COMMUNITY PHARMACY AGREEMENT

Putting community into pharmacy agreements

CHOICE is calling for greater consumer involvement in public health policy.

In July, Health Minister Nicola Roxon and the Pharmacy Guild of Australia began negotiations for the fifth Community Pharmacy Agreement. The five-year agreement will affect the prices of medicines listed on the Pharmaceutical Benefits Scheme (PBS), as well as consumer access to medicines by controlling where new pharmacies can be set up. Current rules state that in an urban area a new pharmacy cannot be set up within 1.5km of an existing pharmacy, but in regional areas this increases to 10km.

The federal government has committed to more consumer engagement in health and this agreement is one area in which consumer groups and the community should be involved. CHOICE believes the following recommendations should be considered during negotiations.

- This agreement must include a clear plan for collecting data on PBS-listed medicines dispensed below the co-payment, including the full price paid by consumers.
- The recommendations of the Allen Consulting Group report, which found the location rules provide little consumer benefit and only advantage existing pharmacy operators, should be implemented.
- A full and independent review of the fifth Community Pharmacy Agreement should commence in January 2013. This should be the sole responsibility of the Department of Health and Ageing, with a representative advisory committee including pharmacy and consumer groups and other relevant organisations.

Consumers are important stakeholders and must be involved in discussing their expectations of pharmacies and the agreement. Anything less would be failing to give consumers a strong voice in this important debate.

This agreement is a key area of public health in which consumer groups and the community should be involved.

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Bold type indicates a test, survey or trial report, unbolded type indicates other articles.

* Indicates an update of a previous report, additions or corrections to reports, small follow-up items, letters or recalls.

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The image displays two promotional brochures for Dr. Laronce's liposuction services. The brochure on the left is titled 'Vaser Lipo' and features a grid of before-and-after photographs showing results for various areas like the abdomen, back, and thighs. It includes text such as 'Non-Invasive Liposuction' and 'Vaser Lipo'. The brochure on the right is titled 'Liposuction / ManBoobs' and features a large 'BEFORE' and 'AFTER' comparison of a man's chest. Red arrows point from the 'Liposuction / ManBoobs' brochure to the 'Vaser Lipo' brochure.

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White, Navy.

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[illegible]

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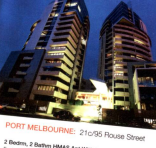
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